





*Beta Israel:*  
the Jews of Ethiopia and Beyond.  
History, Identity and Borders

edited by

Emanuela Trevisan Semi and Shalva Weil

C A F O  
S C A R  
I N A -

*Beta Israel: the Jews of Ethiopia and Beyond. History, Identity and Borders*

Edited by Emanuela Trevisan Semi and Shalva Weil

Università Ca' Foscari Venezia  
Dipartimento di Studi sull'Asia  
e sull'Africa Mediterranea

© 2011 Università Ca' Foscari Venezia  
ISBN: 978-88-7543-286-7

Libreria Editrice Cafoscarina srl  
Dorsoduro 3259, 30123 Venezia  
[www.cafoscarina.it](http://www.cafoscarina.it)

Tutti i diritti riservati.

*Prima edizione febbraio 2011*

## CONTENTS

Introduction	7
JAMES QUIRIN Personal Reflections on Researching <i>Beta Israel</i> History	11
HAIM ADMOR The Question about the <i>Beta Israel</i> 's Jewish Identity, at the Crossroads of History and Argumentation	25
EMANUELA TREVISAN SEMI East and West through the Conversations between Jacques Faitlovitch and Farid Kassab	45
ALICE JANKOWSKI “An Obligation of Honour”: Glimpses of the Forgotten Story of the Pro-Falasha Committee in Germany	57
JOSEPH (GIUSEPPE) LEVI Taamerat Emmanuel and Giuseppe Levi. A Friendship between an Ethiopian Jewish <i>Maskil</i> and a Florentine Jewish Rabbi	75
ANITA NUDELMAN AND MELKAMU YAACOV Aleka Yaacov: Undisputed Healer and Leader among Ethiopian Jews	101

SHARON SHALOM The Time of Circumcision in the <i>Beta Israel</i> Community	117
RON ATAR The Performance Practice in <i>Beta Israel</i> Prayers – a Service for the New Moon ( <i>ya-Caraqâ Ba'âl</i> ): a Case Study	133
SHALVA WEIL Mikael Aragawi: Christian Missionary among the <i>Beta Israel</i>	147
RAVIT COHEN The Ethnography of the Gondar Compound: “Waiting” and what it means	159
EDITH BRUDER The <i>Beit Avraham</i> of Kechene: The Emergence of a New Jewish Community in Ethiopia	181

## INTRODUCTION

This volume focuses around the issues of history, identity and borders concerning the *Beta Israel* (Jews of Ethiopia). The *Beta Israel* practised ancient Jewish rites, as Sharon Shalom describes in this volume, which were quite different from Rabbinic lore. Their performance of liturgy was characterized by distinct, unique musical phenomena, which Ron Atar documents. This volume brings together a selection of papers that were presented in two international conferences hosted by SOSTEJE (Society for the Study of Ethiopian Jewry) held in Florence in October 2007 and in Gondar, Ethiopia in November 2009. James Quirin was the keynote speaker at the Gondar conference, where he traced in a retrospective the oral history and fieldwork he had carried out in Ethiopia and among the *Beta Israel* in the 1960's and 1970's.

Florence is strongly connected with the beginning of the Western part of *Beta Israel* contemporary history. In fact, it was in this city that the first Pro-Falasha Committee was established in 1907 by Jacques Faitlovitch, the Polish Jew who studied Semitic languages in Paris and spent all his life in travelling to and fro between Ethiopia, Europe, United States and Palestine. He was concerned with the Jews of Ethiopia, at time known as “Falashas”, a term that today is considered derogatory. His Jewish identity model was at odds with that of Rabbi Haim Nahoum, who was sent by the French *Alliance Israélite Universelle* to report on the Jewish identity of the *Beta Israel*: Haim Admor analyses in this volume the argumentative analysis of the reports of both personalities who visited the *Beta Israel* in Ethiopia

during the same period. In Faitlovitch's mind, the *Beta Israel* had to be integrated into mainstream Judaism, that is to say into Western Judaism, and had to be educated in Europe in order to be prepared as future "native" teachers to be sent back to Ethiopia in order to further his educational ideals. The unusual correspondence between Jacques Faitlovitch and Farid Kassab is the subject of Emanuela Trevisan Semi's chapter in this volume.

At that time, Zvi Margulies, an Ashkenazi rabbi from East Europe, was the Rabbi of the Florentine community, who shared Faitlovitch's project to "save" the *Beta Israel*. The first Pro-Falasha Committee was soon followed by a German Pro-Falasha Committee set up Frankfurt on Main in 1914 and documented in detail by Alice Jankowski. In Florence there were already two young *Beta Israel* coming from Ethiopia, the first to be educated in Europe. One of these was Taamerat Emmanuel, a brilliant and cultivated youth, who would become a close friend of the grandfather of the present day's Florentine Rabbi Giuseppe Levi, one of the contributors to this volume.

The *Beta Israel* have lived in Gondar and its surrounding areas, including the Simien, for centuries, where they engaged in specific occupations, as smiths and landless agriculturalists. Nudelman and Yaacov relate the unique memoirs of Aleka Yaacov, a healer, who lived in the area for most of his life prior to his *aliyah* (emigration). Other *Beta Israel* resided in Tigray and other provinces. The vast majority of the *Beta Israel* left Gondar in the 1980's and 1990's and live today in the State of Israel, although some people called *Felesmura* are today awaiting emigration, as Ravit Cohen describes, in a compound in Gondar. Many of these people converted to Christianity from the middle of the nineteenth century on. The greatest of the "native" missionaries was Mikael Aragawi, many of whose descendants immigrated to Israel, as Shalva Weil demonstrates.

The authors in this volume come from a wide range of disciplines, including anthropology, literature, ethno-musicology and Jewish studies. They work in different European countries, including France, Israel, Italy, Switzerland, Germany and more. Some are of native Ethiopian origin, while most are researchers of Ethiopian Jewry. Some are doctoral students, while others are well-established professors in their fields.



The volume is organized into three sections. The largest section begins off with so far undocumented modern history of the *Beta Israel*, by tracing the identity of the *Beta Israel* in Ethiopia at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the role of Dr. Jacques Faitlovitch and the work of his students in aligning *Beta Israel* with world Jewry. This section incorporates original articles on the correspondence between Dr. Faitlovitch and an Arab intellectual, the establishment of the Pro-Falasha committee in Germany, and unpublished material on one of Dr. Faitlovitch's outstanding pupils who studied in Europe, and developed a special friendship with an Italian Jew.

The second section will describe unique *Beta Israel* religious practices, such as the service for the new moon, and the circumcision ceremony as practised by the *Beta Israel*, which are at times compared with normative Judaic customs.

The third section moves from the history of the *Beta Israel* in Ethiopia to contemporary trends within and without the community. A chapter documents nineteenth and twentieth century missionary activity among the *Beta Israel*, and then move to describing the contemporary group called *Felesmura* or *Zera Beta Israel* still waiting to immigrate to Israel. Finally, a chapter by Edith Bruder examines the identities of the *Beit Avraham* of Kechene, Ethiopia, who identify with the *Beta Israel* and their successful emigration to Israel.

This collection provides a novel view of different and evolving identities of the *Beta Israel* from the early twentieth century till today, fanning out from a Hebraic-type of Judaism, to a loosely-defined view of Judaism, as expressed by other groups who regard the *Beta Israel* as their role model. The volume brings into focus the question of borders: between the *Beta Israel* and other normative Jews, between the *Beta Israel* in Ethiopia and the *Beta Israel* in Israel, between the *Beta Israel* and other Israelis, and between the *Beta Israel* and *non-Beta Israel* groups aspiring to the same status as the *Beta Israel*.

*Emanuela Trevisan Semi, Venice*  
*Shalva Weil, Jerusalem*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Emanuela Trevisan Semi is most thankful to Piera Rossetto, who have helped prepare the manuscript for publication.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS  
ON RESEARCHING *BETA ISRAEL* HISTORY<sup>1</sup>

*James Quirin, Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee, USA*

**Motives for studying on the *Beta Israel***

As I began researching *Beta Israel* history, and especially later when I began speaking about and publishing the results of my research, I was often asked how I got interested in the subject originally. It is certainly a legitimate question to ask “where one is coming from,” as my students at Fisk University like to phrase it. In this case, it was perhaps particularly pertinent since most of the interest, advocacy and research on this group had been carried out since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century by foreign Jews and related to the issue of the extent to which they were similar or different from world Jewish standards and practices. This strain was begun by Joseph Halevy and Jacques Faitlovitch who

---

<sup>1</sup> When I was invited by Shalva Weil, the President of the Society for the Study of Ethiopian Jewry (SOSTEJE), to present the Keynote Address at the SOSTEJE Gondar conference in November 2009, I was both gratified and hesitant. SOSTEJE’s scholars have been the leading edge of new research on the Ethiopian Jews for the past few decades, and I appreciated the opportunity to share some personal thoughts on the development of my own interest and research on the *Beta Israel*. My hesitancy revolved around the fact that I had not completed any new research or publications on the *Beta Israel* for some time. But when Shalva Weil explained that I could give a “retrospective” personal view at the SOSTEJE conference, I accepted her invitation. This written version of my address attempts to capture some of the flavour of that oral presentation, but is in no sense a comprehensive or state of the research overview.

both strongly believed the *Beta Israel* were Jews, but ones whose practices needed reform to make them conform to current normative practices.<sup>2</sup> Other foreign Jews argued the *Beta Israel* were not real Jews and deserved no support or advocacy.<sup>3</sup>

A second perspective on the *Beta Israel* came from European Christians who had accepted the Jewishness of the *Beta Israel* since the observations of James Bruce and Samuel Gobat in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>4</sup> By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Christian missionaries were working actively to convert the Ethiopian Jews to Christianity, an effort that continued through the 1970s.<sup>5</sup>

A third perspective on the *Beta Israel* of which I soon became aware was the view of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and scholars in that tradition that the *Beta Israel* were descendants of Jews who migrated to Ethiopia with Menilek I, the legendary son of King Solomon of Israel and the Queen of Sheba, as expressed in the Ethiopian national epic, the *Kebrä Nagast* (Glory of the Kings). According to that tradition, some of the Jews who came with Menilek refused to convert to Christianity when the new religion came into the country, and later resisted conversion and conquest in active rebellion against the expansion of the Christian Empire of Ethiopia in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries especially. A short version of these views may be found in the traditional work of *alaqa* Tayya Gabra Maryam,<sup>6</sup> and the Ethiopian Chronicles document such acts of resistance by the *ayhud* (Jews) in northwest Ethiopia.<sup>7</sup> A fourth perspective of which I gradually became aware was that attractive to some African Americans in particular. This view focused on the concept of Black Jews, and the fascinating alleged connections of the *Beta Israel* to African Americans.<sup>8</sup>

I did not fit into any of these perspectives, in terms of a motive

<sup>2</sup> HALÉVY 1877; FAITLOVITCH 1905; FAITLOVITCH 1910. See especially the recent study TREVISAN SEMI 2007.

<sup>3</sup> NAHOUM 1908; PARFITT 1999.

<sup>4</sup> BRUCE 1790, I, 485 ; GOBAT 1851, 32-33 et 466-468.

<sup>5</sup> QUIRIN 1992, 179-191; KAPLAN 1987, 27-42; QUIRIN 2002; QUIRIN forthcoming (c); PAYNE 1972.

<sup>6</sup> TAYYA GABRA MARYAM 1987, 51-57.

<sup>7</sup> QUIRIN 1992, 47-62; QUIRIN 1988.

<sup>8</sup> BEN-JOCHANNAN 1993. A recent study is TREVISAN SEMI 2002.

or reason for an interest in studying the group. I am not Ethiopian; I am neither Black, nor am I even Jewish. I had no personal interest in either “saving” or converting the *Beta Israel*, nor was I searching for my own roots. The roots of my interest in studying the Ethiopian Jews lie in my first experience in Ethiopia, from 1965 to 1969, first as a Peace Corps Volunteer, teaching in Bati, a small town in Wallo Province for two years, and then continuing my stay in Ethiopia for another two years teaching right here in Gondar as a contract teacher with the Ministry of Education.

Having been raised in a rather parochial small town in Oregon, my initial Ethiopian saga was a life-changing experience, both personally and professionally. As I learned more about Ethiopia, I was struck by the contrast of its wealth of culture and history and the economic poverty that was all around me. In my Peace Corps experience, I was expected to teach ancient world history and geography to 7<sup>th</sup> graders with cast-off British books that dealt with ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, India, China, Greece and Rome with no mention of Africa south of Egypt - all that in a country with a two-thousand year documented history of its own which was not mentioned in any books!

As I returned to school for graduate studies in history after my four-year experience in Ethiopia, I decided to change my field from an emphasis on European history to African history, particularly focusing on Ethiopia. But I also had to be realistic in this transition; I had been away from college for five years and so I decided to return to the University of Oregon where I had completed my B.A. in history with a focus on European history. I was known there and could build on my previous work which I did by completing my M.A. in history in one year with a continuing focus on Europe, particularly 20<sup>th</sup> century European socialism.

From Oregon, I went to the University of Minnesota in 1971 where I discovered a whole new world of African social history, and the use of oral traditions to reconstruct it.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> My principal mentor in this area was Allen Isaacman, a specialist on the use of oral traditions to research the social history of Mozambique and southern Africa in general, in such works as ISAACMAN 1972 and ISAACMAN 1976. Isaacman did his graduate work at the University of Wisconsin, where he learned from Jan

Within a year, I began to develop my PhD topic which combined a concern with understanding the history of the peoples of Ethiopia with the use of the innovative methodology of using oral traditions as a major source. Of course, there are both strengths and limitations of oral traditions, some of which I explored in later articles.<sup>10</sup>

At that point, I was fired up about the possibilities of using oral traditions to understand the history of the *Beta Israel*, even though I was not sure then if they even had such traditions in some kind of usable form!

As I had begun to read everything I could find about Ethiopian history as well as social anthropology, archaeology, linguistics, and contemporary affairs since my first experience in Peace Corps training at UCLA between June and September 1965, I had become increasingly aware of the pervasive dominance of the central state tradition in the literature. The presence of the rich corpus of written sources for Ethiopian history was an advantage compared to many other African states and societies, but it also meant such sources tended to dominate the field of historical research and the perspectives of the historians. The interpretations always seemed to be from the top down, from the power of the central state and society to perpetuate itself and assimilate or incorporate diverse peoples and groups within its all-encompassing reach. This perspective was stated unambiguously but not uniquely in the 1970s as I was developing my ideas: “the central theme of Ethiopian history...has been the maintenance of a central core which has adapted itself to the exigencies of time and place, assimilating diverse peoples.”<sup>11</sup> At that point in the radicalization of my thinking, I was completely opposed to such a perspective!

Naturally, it was essential to find out what that dominant perspective was in as much detail as possible, so I read everything I could find in terms of the royal chronicles, hagiographies, and whatever all the foreign travelers who had visited Ethiopia from ancient times to the 20<sup>th</sup>

---

Vansina, the pioneering scholar of the methodology of oral traditions. Other influential scholars and teachers at Minnesota were Lansine Kaba, a specialist on West Africa, and the political scientist August Nimtz, a specialist on Tanzania.

<sup>10</sup> QUIRIN 1988; QUIRIN 1993; QUIRIN 1995.

<sup>11</sup> GABRE-SELLASIE 1975, 1.

century had to say about the country, and specifically the *Beta Israel*, or as they all called them, the Falasha or Black Jews, or sometimes Ethiopian Jews.<sup>12</sup> Of course, the chronicle literature mostly used the term *ayhud* (usually to be translated as Jews or Jewish people), a topic I dealt with later. Reading through these thousands of pages was often like an archaeologist sifting through layers of dirt and sand to get to the nuggets of information or insight that would contribute to an understanding of the topic. My aim was to be as comprehensive as possible.

### **The Use of Oral History**

As I was developing my topic, I became more hopeful and excited about the possibility of using oral materials, since it was clear that written sources alone were going to be insufficient to reconstruct much of an internal history of the people. In the written sources, whenever the group was in conflict with the central state, they were of interest, though mainly as objects of opposition and conquest. But after the particular conflict was over, the people were forgotten. Of course, that would be the case, since the chronicles are not histories of the country, or even of the state as a whole, but are royal chronicles. And the saints' lives were not about the people converted in any great depth, but about those agents of conversion, the saints and the Christian church.

It was thus becoming clearer as I was developing my topic that internal sources such as oral traditions would be essential - if they existed - in order to make up the gap. I also decided that for a comparative perspective, I would investigate whether there were oral sources with regard to Kemant history, a nearby "pagan-Hebraic" people in the greater Gondar area.<sup>13</sup> Although I did eventually interview several people concerning Kemant culture and history, the weight and depth of their oral historical memory did not compare with that of the *Beta Israel* and, therefore, I was not able to do a full book-length

---

<sup>12</sup> WEIL 1985.

<sup>13</sup> GAMST 1969.

comparison of the two, though I did include a section on the Kemant in the dissertation, and later completed a comparative article.<sup>14</sup>

My topic received dissertation research funding from the Social Science Research Council and after many delays due to the ongoing revolution in Ethiopia, I arrived in the country in January 1975, just as the young people being sent into the countryside to sell the revolution in the *zemecha* (campaign) were leaving Addis. After further delays, the story of which I will spare the details here, I arrived in Gondar with my wife and two children.

My return to Gondar in 1975 was in many senses a homecoming, both personal and professional. I had taught in the Gondar secondary school from 1967 to 1969, and my daughter, Elsabet, was born 42 years ago in the hospital of what was then the Gondar Public Health College.<sup>15</sup> While I was recovering from hepatitis during the summer of 1968, I was told to eat only boiled food and rest, so I spent most of the time reading books that I had borrowed from the Public Health College library. So I have very personal memories of my life in Gondar! My wife, Ansha, who was originally from Wallo, was also returning to a town which she had enjoyed in the late 1960s, and we now also had a son, Dennis, who was born in Minnesota while I was in graduate school.

## On Informants and Places

My research experience would not have been possible without the assistance of numerous people. My introduction to the *Beta Israel* was first made possible with the help of Yona Bogale whom I met in Addis Ababa early in 1975 while awaiting permission to travel to Gondar.<sup>16</sup> Though he lived in Addis, he came to Gondar about the time that I arrived there and together we walked from Tadda to Ambober, during

---

<sup>14</sup> QUIRIN 1977, 255-318; QUIRIN 1998.

<sup>15</sup> I had my own experience in the hospital where I was treated for hepatitis and underwent an appendectomy during the two years I was here!

<sup>16</sup> For a biography of Yona Bogale, see WEIL 1987.



which we had fascinating conversations and where he introduced me to the principal people there. I stayed several days on my first visit, sleeping on the floor of one of the classrooms in the school that had been built with external assistance. I met some of the younger people such as Asnaku Sendেকে, and interviewed some of the elders such as *abba Gete Asrass*, in particular, as well as others. I got my first flavor of not only *Beta Israel* oral history, but also experienced aspects of their culture and daily life. I returned to Ambober several months later to observe their annual *segd* holiday.<sup>17</sup> I spoke informally with the people, drank coffee and ate meals in their houses, and discussed many topics including the ongoing Ethiopian Revolution and the proposed changes in land tenure laws that had just been proclaimed. At that time, I felt they were guardedly optimistic that their lives in Ethiopia would improve.

In general, I followed a similar research process during the next several months. We were renting a house in Gondar, in the area known from Italian times as Auto Parco, but whose more traditional name was Kayla Meda, documented in the chronicles of the Gondar kings of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. I interviewed *Beta Israel*, as well as traditional scholars in Gondar with knowledge of general Gondar history, and I traveled to as many *Beta Israel* villages as time, logistics, and the general security situation of the region permitted up until January 1976.

My research grant was not sufficient to pay for private transportation, so I typically traveled by public bus to a town on the main road and walked from there to visit several villages in Dambeya, Wagara and Chelga, besides my several visits to Wolleqa,<sup>18</sup> as well as Ambober and Wuzaba. I had to rely on what people told me about the security of several areas during this period that was still in the beginning stages of the Ethiopian Revolution. I was told not to go to Dabra Tabor which had been an historically significant location during the Tewodros period in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century because a prominent official had been recently killed there. I was told not to stay long in Chelga and not to go further toward Matamma and the Qwara area because some foreigners

---

<sup>17</sup> Among many other sources on this celebration, see QUIRIN forthcoming 2010(b).

<sup>18</sup> WEIL forthcoming 2010.

had been kidnapped off a bus there. I wanted to go into Samen, but had logistical issues in arranging the trip so I only made it to the edge of Samen in Debark, though I did find some informants who had knowledge of Samen. I also did make it to southern Tegray province where I interviewed people in the Shire region concerning the very important and often ignored Tegray community of *Beta Israel*.

The question of who to interview was determined by references from the younger people who I met mostly in Gondar or the nearby region. I traveled with intermediaries to specific villages to try to interview specific people whom I had been told about as someone who had some knowledge of *Beta Israel* history. Most of the interviews were with one person at a time, though a few times others in the village began to contribute and in some cases proved much more knowledgeable than the person whom I was originally interviewing, so there was often an element of serendipity involved.

Besides the constraints of security, logistics and time, I also found out very early in the process about the issues concerning divisions with the *Beta Israel* community. For such a small group - the generally accepted total population number at the time was about 28,000 - there were serious multiple divisions. I found out quickly that some individuals were *persona non grata* in certain villages and with certain potential informants. It was very complex and to me, a person who tries mightily to get along with everyone, very hard to understand initially. However, I think I dealt with these divisions adequately once I became aware of them.

My research process was to tape the interviews and bring them back to my house in Gondar where I had research assistants help me translate them to English. During my stays in Gondar I was able to compare the content of different interviews, as well as compare them to the knowledge I had gained already from written sources, so I could find the congruencies and differences among the various sources, and in some cases return to the most knowledgeable informants at later dates for further interviews to ask specific questions that had arisen. One of my assistants was Asrat Seyoum whom I had originally met as a fellow teacher in Bati school in 1965. We had been in touch since, and his work was invaluable.

After a year of research in Ethiopia, we passed through London on our way home and I spent a fruitful week in the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London, and in the library of the British Museum, reading and especially photocopying as many sources as I could. Of course, since we arrived straight from the hottest time of the year in Ethiopia to a dreary London winter, we all had to buy coats! I had originally planned to spend some time in Paris at the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, but I had already been able to read on microfilm at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies in Addis some of the sources I had planned to see there, such as the unpublished papers of Antoine d'Abbadie and Arnauld d'Abbadie, so we missed Paris on this trip, but in any case I was almost out of money!

### **Contributions to Research**

In summary, I believe my contributions to *Beta Israel* research have been in three areas: 1) the reconstruction of *Beta Israel* socio-ethnic history with the broader context of the Ethiopian state and society 2) the systematic use of oral traditions as an essential source to get an internal view of the people's history 3) an effort to be as thorough as possible while recognizing that all historical research is a partial reconstruction of the reality and that other data, perspectives and interpretations are also important and significant in trying to understand history.

Since my research which focused on *Beta Israel* history before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, other significant lines of inquiry have of course included the massive amount of research on the immigration and incorporation of the Ethiopian Jews in Israel, and the theme of "modernity" or the changing nature of their religion and society in response to new challenges - two topics to which many of you in this room and others who are not present tonight have contributed.<sup>19</sup> In addition an important beginning has been made in archaeology, in an archaeological dig

---

<sup>19</sup> See the several bibliographies compiled by SOSTEJE and articles in the proceedings of previous conferences of SOSTEJE. In addition, see WEIL 2009; QUIRIN forthcoming (c).

centered on the former *Beta Israel* enclave of Abwara near Gondar.<sup>20</sup> As elsewhere in the world, archaeology holds forth the promise of developing or confirming time periods and reaching a greater understanding of the material culture of a people.

In conclusion, my own scholarship has moved on to other areas, such as the intersections of world history,<sup>21</sup> African,<sup>22</sup> African American,<sup>23</sup> general Ethiopian history,<sup>24</sup> and teaching methodology.<sup>25</sup> But *Beta Israel* history in the context of Ethiopian history remains my first love, both professionally and personally. My approach to historical research elsewhere is governed by the same overall framework I developed during my research on the *Beta Israel*, as I expressed in the following statement:

[Ethnohistory] perspectives focus on the history of those peoples and groups who have usually been excluded from historical analyses, or treated merely as passive ciphers in the great sweep of events because of their relative lack of power in the general society which resulted from factors of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or social position. All peoples have histories no matter how remote they may be from the centers of power, wealth, or influence in particular societies. The task of historians is to reconstruct the ways in which people have been agents of their own history within various institutional, geographic, and chronological contexts.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to my professional social science interest, I have been personally inspired by the moving story of the *Beta Israel* struggle to maintain their integrity and cultural identity over the centuries, a struggle which continues to the present.

---

<sup>20</sup> KLEIN 2007.

<sup>21</sup> See QUIRIN 2008; QUIRIN 2007.

<sup>22</sup> QUIRIN 2005; QUIRIN work in progress.

<sup>23</sup> QUIRIN 2001; QUIRIN 2006.

<sup>24</sup> QUIRIN forthcoming (d).

<sup>25</sup> QUIRIN 2009 (a); QUIRIN 2009 (b).

<sup>26</sup> QUIRIN 1992, xii. This book is being republished by Tsehai Publishers of California ([www.tsehaipublishers.com](http://www.tsehaipublishers.com)).

## Bibliography

- BEN-JOCHANNAN Y., *We the Black Jews*, Baltimore, Black Classic Press, 1993.
- BRUCE J., *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile*, 5 vols., Edinburgh, 1790, I.
- FAITLOVITCH J., *Notes d'un voyage chez les Falachas (Juifs d'Abyssinie)*, Paris, Leroux, 1905.
- FAITLOVITCH J., *Quer Durch Abessinien: Meine zweite Reise zu den Falashas*, Berlin, Poppelauer, 1910.
- GABRE-SELASSIE Z., *Yohannes IV of Ethiopia*, Oxford, 1975.
- GAMST F., *The Qemant: A Pagan-Hebraic Peasantry of Ethiopia*, New York, Holt-Rinehart-Winston, 1969.
- GOBAT S., *Journal of Three Years' Residence in Abyssinia*, New York, 1851.
- HALÉVI J., "Travels in Abyssinia", in LÖWY A.L. (ed.), *Miscellany of Hebrew Literature*, London, 1877, ser.2, vol.2, 175-200.
- ISAACMAN A., *Mozambique – The Africanization of a European Institution. The Zambesi Prazos, 1750-1902*, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1972.
- ISAACMAN A., *The Tradition of Resistance in Mozambique: the Zambesi Valley*, Berkley, University of California Press, 1976.
- KAPLAN S., "The Beta Israel (Falasha) Encounter with Protestant Missionaries, 1860-1905", *Jewish Social Studies*, 49, 1, 1987, 27-42.
- KLEIN R., *We do not Eat Meat with Christians: Interaction and Integration between the Beta Israel and Amhara Christians of Gonder, Ethiopia*, Ph.D. dissertation: University of Florida, 2007.
- NAHOUM H., "Mission chez les Falachas d'Abyssinie", *Bulletin de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle*, 33, 1908, 100-137.
- PARFITT T., "Rabbi Nahoum's Anthropological Mission to Ethiopia", in PARFITT T. and TREVISAN SEMI E. (eds.), *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel: Studies on Ethiopian Jews*, Richmond, Curzon, 1999, 1-14.
- PAYNE E., *Ethiopian Jews: the Story of a Mission*, London, Olive Press, 1972.
- QUIRIN J., *The Beta Israel (Felasha) in Ethiopian History: Caste Formation and Culture Change, 1270-1868*, PhD Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1977.
- QUIRIN J., "The Beta Israel (Falasha) and 'Ayhud in Fifteenth-Century Ethiopia: Oral and Written Traditions", *Northeast African Studies*, 10, 2-3, 1988, 89-104.

- QUIRIN J., *The Evolution of the Ethiopian Jews: A History of the Beta Israel (Falasha) to 1920*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992.
- QUIRIN J., “Oral Traditions as Historical Sources in Ethiopia: the Case of Beta Israel (Falasha)”, *History in Africa*, 20, 1993, 297-312.
- QUIRIN J., “Ayhud and Falasha: Oral and Written Traditions concerning the Reign of King Yeshaq in Fifteenth Century Ethiopia,” in KAPLAN S. et Al. (eds.), *Between Africa and Zion: Proceedings of the First International Congress of the Society for the Study of Ethiopian Jewry*, Jerusalem, Ben-Zvi Institute, 1995, 55-71.
- QUIRIN J., “Caste and Class in Historical North-West Ethiopia: The Beta Israel (Falasha) and Kemant, 1300-1900”, *Journal of African History*, 39, 1998, 195-220.
- QUIRIN J., “Her Sons and Daughters are ever on the Altar: Fisk University and Missionaries to Africa, 1866-1937”, *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 60, 1, 2001, 17-37.
- QUIRIN J., “Ethiopian Beta Israel (Falasha) Convert Biographies, 1837 – 1931”, in BAYE YIMAM et Al. (eds.), *Ethiopian Studies at the End of the Second Millennium: Proceedings of the XIVth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, November 6-11, 2000, Addis Ababa, Addis Ababa, 2002*, vol 1, 451-476.
- QUIRIN J., “Pan-Africanism”, in McNEIL W. (ed.), *Berkshire Encyclopedia of World History*, Berkshire, Massachusetts, 2005, IV, 1418-1423.
- QUIRIN J., “African American Perceptions of the battle of Adwa, 1896 – 1914”, in UHLIG S. (ed.), *Proceedings of the XVth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Hamburg, Germany, July 20-25, 2003, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2006*, 343-347.
- QUIRIN J. (ed.), *Readings of the World and Its peoples*, Littleton, Massachusetts, Tapestry Press, 2007.
- QUIRIN J., “Origins of Global Wealth Disparities: A World History case Study”, in MORAN B. (ed.), *Race and Wealth Disparities: A Multidisciplinary Discourse*, Lanham, Maryland, University Press of America, 2008, 1-10.
- QUIRIN J., “Uses Cases to Teach Ethiopian, African and World History”, in SVEINEGE et Al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Trondheim, Norway, 2007*, Trondheim, 2009 (a).
- QUIRIN J., “World History and Global Consciousness: A Case Study in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning”, *The History Teacher*, 42, 2009 (b), 159-175.
- QUIRIN J., “Beta Israel Convert Biographies”, *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, forthcoming 2010 (a).

- QUIRIN J., “Segd”, in UHLIG S. (ed.), *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, Wiesbaden, forthcoming 2010 (b).
- QUIRIN J., “Beta Israel”, in DINER D. (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Jewish History and Culture*, Stuttgart, forthcoming (c).
- QUIRIN J., “Ethiopian and Japanese History: Some Comparisons”, in KWESI KWAA PRAH (ed.), *Afro-Japanese Relations in Historical Perspective, Proceedings of a Conference organized jointly by the centre for Advanced Studies of African Society and Osaka University, Johannesburg, South Africa, November 1-3, 2007*, Cape Town, South Africa, Casas, forthcoming (d).
- QUIRIN J., “The Emerging African Consciousness of W.E.B. Du Bois, 1885-1915”, work in progress.
- TAYYA GABRA MARYAM, *History of the People of Ethiopia (1922)*, Uppsala, Centre for multiethnic research of Uppsala University, 1987.
- TREVISAN SEMI E., “The ‘Falashisation’ of the Blacks of Harlem: A Judaizing Movement in 20<sup>th</sup> Century USA”, in PARFITT T. and TREVISAN SEMI E. (eds.), *Judaizing Movements: Studies in the Margins of Judaism*, London, Routledge/Curzon, 2002, 87-110.
- TREVISAN SEMI E., *Jacques Faitlovitch and the Jews of Ethiopia*, London, Vallentine Mitchell, 2007.
- WEIL S., “Collective Designations and Collective Identity among Ethiopian Jews”, *Israel Social Science Research*, 10, 2, 1985, 25-40.
- WEIL S., “In Memoriam: Yona Bogale”, *Pe’amim*, 33, 1987, 140-144. (in Hebrew).
- WEIL S., “Beta Israel Students who Studied Abroad, 1905-1935,” in SVEIN EGE et. al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 16<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Trondheim, Norway, 2007*, Trondheim, 2009.
- WEIL S., “Wolleqa”, in UHLIG S. (ed.), *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, Wiesbaden, forthcoming 2010.





THE QUESTION ABOUT THE *BETA ISRAEL'S*  
JEWISH IDENTITY, AT THE CROSSROADS  
OF HISTORY AND ARGUMENTATION

*Haim Admor, Tel Aviv University, Department of French*

Despite their dispersion among the nations, which followed the exile imposed by the Romans on the people of Israel, the Jews have preserved their collective identity.<sup>1</sup> We state that this identity, founded in the Bible, rests on three complementary principles. The first is the principle of an alliance with the God of Israel, which is realized through a social and cultural behaviour based on the Mosaic precepts and the norms set by the rabbinical oral tradition. This is the religious or ethical dimension of Jewish identity. Second, the Jews are Jacob's descendants from whom Israel's twelve Tribes originated. This is the genetic or ethnic dimension of Jewish identity that characterizes the People of Israel as a distinct collectivity. Third, according to the national dimension, the Jewish people maintains an uninterrupted bond with the land of Israel, the group's origin and destiny.

As the Jews entered into modernity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a turning point was marked with regard to their condition, and consequently, the definition of their collective identity. Sensitized to the European Enlightenment's universalism and humanism and attracted by the prospects offered by social equality and individual freedom, emancipation movements emerged. Moreover, for the first time in

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on my M.A. thesis under the supervision of Prof. R. Amosy and Prof. E. Trevisan Semi: *Le rapport de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle sur les Béta Israël d'Ethiopie (1909) – Une analyse argumentative*, Tel Aviv University, 2008.

history, Jews were given citizen status and became full members of their residing nations. However, this new situation created several conflicts that have led many Jews to question each of the three identity dimensions as follows:

1/ Up to which point is the ethnic dimension, that sees the Jewish people as distinct and irreducible, still relevant when the Jews live integrated among the non-Jews?

2/ Is it possible, in a secular society, to define the ethical dimension without referring to the ancestral religion?

3/ Is the national dimension, which states there is a bond with the Land of Israel despite centuries of exile, still relevant after each Jew has become a nation-state citizen?<sup>2</sup>

From the various answers to these questions arose many interpretations for each of the principles, which led to new identity models. This diversification has inevitably resulted in complex, and at times incompatible, Jewish identity definitions.

This impossibility of clearly defining Jewish identity has had consequences in the Ethiopian Jewry's modern history. Discovered in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by the Jewish community of Egypt,<sup>3</sup> the *Beta Israel* or Falashas,<sup>4</sup> were forgotten and then "rediscovered" in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by the explorer James Bruce, who met them in Ethiopia. But it was from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and onward, at the time when the Jewish identity was questioned by the emancipation, that the western Jewry's attention was called to this particular Ethiopian socio-cultural group, following the publication of articles related to indigenous Jews' conversion by Protestant missionaries in Ethiopia.<sup>5</sup> In accordance with the Talmudic principle of Jewish solidarity, European Jews were inclined to mobilize and help Jewish communities in trouble. However, regarding the Falashas, the immediate question about the

---

<sup>2</sup> BEN-RAFAEL 2001, 36.

<sup>3</sup> WALDMAN 1989.

<sup>4</sup> The term Falasha was synonymous with Ethiopian Jew until the community immigration to Israel. Meaning exile in Amharic, it is nowadays viewed as derogatory (KAPLAN 1992, 66). It will be used only with reference to the analyzed historical texts.

<sup>5</sup> SUMMERFIELD 2003.

Jewish identity of this African group was raised. Were the Falashas, who emerged from time immemorial, really Jews?

Opinions on this issue were divided. Regarding the ethical religious dimension, the *Beta Israel* have always respected the Mosaic precepts. However, until their meeting with the world Jewry, there have always existed notorious differences between their religious customs and rabbinical normative Judaism. As for the ethnic dimension, the *Beta Israel* (House of Israel in Amharic) regarded themselves as Israelites descendants.<sup>6</sup> But the historical origins of this group, which was perfectly integrated into the Ethiopian socio-cultural context, could not be definitely established. Finally, regarding the national dimension, those who are designated as Falashas, exiles, in Ethiopia, considered themselves as originating from Jerusalem. The holy city was also regarded by their Christian neighbours as the Ethiopian royal dynasty's birthplace.

The question of the *Beta Israel*'s Jewish identity was positively answered in 1973, following the juridical decision of the then Israel Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef.<sup>7</sup> However, during the century and a half which preceded this historical decision, the Jewish world had difficulties in determining if the *Beta Israel* were fully Jews, and a divergence of opinions, if not an open polemic, characterized the discourses dealing with their Jewish identity. Curiously, whereas the *Beta Israel* are nowadays fully recognized Jews and citizens of the State of Israel, this divergence of opinions can be spotted in a few recent historical studies. This persistent disagreement is all the more significant since the question about the *Beta Israel*'s Jewish identity raises the issue of the very definition of Jewish identity. Indeed, one belongs to a human group according to criteria inherent in the definition of the collective identity. However, since the definitions of Jewish identity are as various as they are complex, it is hard to definitively determine if the *Beta Israel* indeed belong to the Jewish people. Thus, the question "are the *Beta Israel* Jews?" implicitly presupposes that one has already answered the question "who is a Jew?"

---

<sup>6</sup> SUMMERFIELD 2003, 4; 6; 10.

<sup>7</sup> WALDMAN 1989, 275.

On this account, we wish to postulate that the impossibility to agree on the *Beta Israel's* Jewish identity can be partly explained by the diversity of the Jewish identity models, on which the various discourses are implicitly founded. Indeed, by reflecting on the different conceptions of Judaism, those models might use different identity definition's criteria. Moreover, such criteria are also shaped by the surrounding culture, ideologies and symbols.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, our assumption also suggests that various currents of opinions and ideologies go through such discourses, which are influenced by explicit or implicit objectives of all types. In order to recognize the identity models embedded in the different discourses (and usually implicit since they are self-evident within their own social and ideological sphere), to identify the ideologies influencing the discourses, and to clarify the social or individual objectives that underlie them, we will turn towards the analysis of argumentation in discourse.

A presentation of this field, developed in the Francophone area of the sciences of language, would largely exceed the framework of this paper. In short, the *Theory of Argumentation in Discourse* adopts a perspective based on the postulate that any kind of utterances, even those that have a strong claim to neutrality, is not only an answer to some previous saying, but is built as such.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, any discourse is a confirmation or an objection to previous discourses, circulating in the verbal surrounding of the speaker. As such, it not only foresees reactions from an audience who can be apparently absent or virtual, but it is more widely and inevitably haunted by the questions lying at the heart of the social and political sphere it emerges from. Consequently, we can consider after Amossy that an argumentative orientation or dimension (at various degrees going from the overtly polemical to the apparently informative or descriptive) exists in all types of discourses emerging in a specific situation of communication.<sup>10</sup> By specifically

---

<sup>8</sup> BEN-RAFAEL 2001, 24.

<sup>9</sup> AMOSSY 2005, 89.

<sup>10</sup> Not every speech does necessarily aim to convince an audience. Nevertheless, any speaker, during a verbal exchange with other subjects, does seek to share its vision of the world, *i.e.* to exert some influence on an addressee who can possibly consider the things differently. It can thus be considered that any speech in

examining the way in which the speaker presents himself in relation to others in his discourse (*ethos*), describes his universe and his positions (*logos*), and affects others by his discourse (*pathos*), we will be able to highlight not only the logic of the discourse, but also its objectives in a singular socio-historical situation of communication. We will also find out the strategies deployed to carry them out, while taking into account the ideological context and the generic framework determining the argumentation.

Consequently, at the crossroads of history and language studies, we project a research articulated around the argumentative analysis of texts dealing with the *Beta Israel* of Ethiopia's Jewish identity. This research aims to understand how, in modern times, various Jewish identity models determined the conflicting positions on this issue, and what were the particular objectives underlying these positions, each within a singular socio-historical context. It uses the *Theory of Argumentation in Discourse*, which provides the historian of discourse with adapted tools for the study of testimonies, archives, narrations or treaties from the past, by turning them into the objects of an argumentative analysis within the framework of a broader historical research. For such texts are also speeches that took place during a verbal exchange (even if it often remained a virtual one), in a determined time, within particular circumstances, and between located partners who were each pursuing their own goal.<sup>11</sup> To illustrate our approach, we will briefly expose some points of the argumentative analysis of the reports of two distinct Jewish missions sent to Ethiopia in 1908 : Rabbi Nahoum's

---

situation supposes an attempt, more or less acknowledged or conscious, to act on others by the means of words, by orienting the slightest bit of their way of seeing and judging the world. Indeed, discourses such as descriptions, testimonies or reports for examples, that do not obviously aim to convince, do reveal an attempt to orient others in the very choice or refusal of a term or a denomination. For an introduction to the Theory of Argumentation in Discourse, see AMOSSY 2000.

<sup>11</sup> If the Theory of Argumentation in Discourse can contribute significantly to historical studies in general, it does not mean the disciplinary borders disappear, since the nature and the objectives of historical questioning do not merge with those of the sciences of language (AMOSSY 2008). On the state of the research in the interdisciplinary field of history and sciences of language, particularly in France, see GUILHAUMOU 2006.

report published in French in the *Bulletin de l'Alliance* in 1909, and Dr. Faitlovitch's report published in German the following year.

### **The 1908 Jewish Missions to Ethiopia**

In 1908, two Jewish missions simultaneously explored the northern region of Ethiopia to meet the “Falashas of Abyssinia”, namely the mission sent by the French philanthropic organization *Alliance Israélite Universelle* and the Italian *Comitato Pro-Falascia* mission. The Pro-Falasha Committee mission was led by Dr. Jacques Faitlovitch (1881-1955), mainly known as the “Father” of the Ethiopian Jews, for he was responsible more than any other person for their entry into Jewish consciousness and history.<sup>12</sup> Till his death in Tel-Aviv, he never ceased to work so they could learn and acquire a material emancipation, as well as to strengthen the bounds between this community and the world Jewry. Faitlovitch was born in Poland and arrived in Paris at the age of seventeen. There, he began to study Semitic languages under Professor Joseph Halévy, the well known Orientalist who was the first western Jew to visit the *Beta Israel* in Ethiopia in 1868. Encouraged by Halévy, Faitlovitch made a first trip to Ethiopia in 1904, following which he dedicated his life to the cause of the *Beta Israel*. The 1908 mission was the second of the twelve journeys he would make to Ethiopia during his life.

As for the French *Alliance*'s mission, it was led by Rabbi Haim Nahoum (1872-1960), who would later become Chief Rabbi of Turkey and then of Egypt.<sup>13</sup> He was born in Turkey and also studied in Paris where he received a secular as well as a religious education. In September 1907, the *Alliance* chose Nahoum to travel and meet the Falashas, despite the fact he had no knowledge either of Ethiopia or of its languages, and never mounted a horse before the mission (he had to take lessons before leaving for his journey to a country where there were no other means of transport). However, since he was an *Alliance*

---

<sup>12</sup> For a biography of Faitlovitch, see TREVISAN SEMI 2007.

<sup>13</sup> For a biography of Nahoum, see BENBASSA 1990.

employee, and a *protégé* of general secretary Jacques Bigart,<sup>14</sup> and had a good knowledge of oriental countries as well as of many languages, the French organization hoped he would be able to find his way in the then little known Ethiopia.<sup>15</sup>

Although independent of each other, both missions aimed to collect all the necessary information for the establishment of a Jewish school network in Ethiopia. However, after they had returned to Europe, the representatives of the two philanthropic organizations came to diametrically opposed conclusions: whereas Dr. Faitlovitch, in his report published in Berlin,<sup>16</sup> preached the urgency to establish a Jewish school in Ethiopia in order to bring the *Beta Israel* closer to the Jewish people and to modernism, Rabbi Nahoum concluded in an article published in the *Bulletin de l'Alliance*,<sup>17</sup> that no action was to be undertaken in their favour. These opposing attitudes are interesting in view of the question they immediately raise: how can one explain the radical contrast between conclusions that resulted from data collected in the same areas, at the same time, and about the same communities? One can assume that it is their interpretations of the empirical data, more than their observations in the field, which may have determined Nahoum's and Faitlovitch's conclusions. This is to say that their respective ideologies conditioned and oriented each of their positions.

This seems to be confirmed by the fact that the two reports emerged from a polemic. Upon Faitlovitch's return from his first expedition to Ethiopia in 1905, he laid down the need for creating Jewish schools for the Falashas, and it was through his initiative that a Pro-Falasha Committee was founded in Italy in order to support this educational project. Consequently, Faitlovitch prepared his second expedition to start this project, in coordination with the new Italian committee and the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, the philanthropic French Jewish association that already managed an international school network.

---

<sup>14</sup> TREVISAN SEMI 1998, 148.

<sup>15</sup> PARFITT 1999, 2.

<sup>16</sup> FAITLOVITCH 1910.

<sup>17</sup> NAHOUM 1908.

Initially, only one Jewish mission was to be sent to Ethiopia.<sup>18</sup> However, the bad relations that evolved between Faitlovitch and the *Alliance* in Paris, as well as a disagreement about the type of education that should be given to the *Beta Israel*, led to a rupture between the *Alliance* and the Italian committee. As an absurd result, two concurrent investigation missions were sent simultaneously to Ethiopia. The two missions' conclusions were therefore influenced by various objectives: ideological objectives concerning the Jewish education to be given to the *Beta Israel*, which implicitly rested on different Jewish identity models; institutional objectives, linked to the conflicting interests of organizations representing different ideological views; and individual objectives concerning each of the representatives' own standpoints and interests.

### **The *Alliance's* Attitude towards the *Beta Israel***

In his article, entitled *Mission chez les Falachas d'Abyssinie*, Nahoum reached the conclusion that no school should be created for the *Beta Israel*. According to him, the extreme dissemination of the Falashas would make a foundation of this kind unrealizable.<sup>19</sup> Above all, the Falashas were a population whose intellectual ability was generally not very developed, as Nahoum stated, and by modifying too abruptly their social and economic conditions, a school might indeed "break the mental balance" of this African population and unnecessarily put it in danger to itself.

There were indeed many practical problems that made the establishment of a school in Ethiopia in 1908 almost unrealizable,

---

<sup>18</sup> TREVISAN SEMI 1998.

<sup>19</sup> "Il ne faudrait pas songer, un instant, à créer une œuvre scolaire quelconque en Abyssinie ou même en Erythrée. L'extrême dissémination des Falachas rendrait une fondation de ce genre irréalisable. (...) Ne nous leurrons pas d'illusions dangereuses : nous avons à faire à une population dont la capacité intellectuelle est peu développée en général, et dont nous ne pouvons, sans danger pour elle-même, modifier trop brusquement les conditions sociales et économiques. (...) ce serait risquer de rompre l'équilibre mental de la race falacha ; et le résultat en serait infiniment regrettable" (NAHOUM 1908, 136).



and in its refusal, the *Alliance* undoubtedly took into account the real difficulties of operating in a distant territory with scattered Falasha communities.<sup>20</sup> But this statement was also in accordance with the colonialist ideology and the racial theories dominant at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that assumed cultures' and human groups' inequality. The French organization indeed shared this eurocentrist ideology.

The *Alliance Israélite Universelle* was founded in 1860 according to the principle of Jewish solidarity and in a post-revolutionary France, which, in 1791 for the first time in history, granted civic and political emancipation to the Jews of France. However, this emancipation was made possible only at the cost of a compromise:<sup>21</sup> to become full citizens, free and equal in rights, the Jews had to cease to belong to a distinct community and to integrate into the French nation. This means that a process of clerical reduction of Judaism was set in motion in French society; from now on, the Mosaic faith was to become merely one religion among others, and Judaism one of the "churches" of France, as Catholicism or Protestantism. The Jews were first and foremost French who could, under the right to freedom of opinions, practice their own religion. Consequently, the philanthropic Jewish association considered itself as the bearer of the European Enlightenment and its values, for they had enabled such a radical change as regards the Jews' social conditions.

For that reason, the *Alliance* intended to assist the destitute Jewish communities of the Orient and North Africa, by providing them with schools and propagating the emancipation model of the Jews of France. Nonetheless, at the same time, the *Alliance*'s members felt embarrassment, if not contempt, *vis-à-vis* the Oriental Jews who were perceived as ignorant, superstitious or obscurantist.<sup>22</sup> If the modern and "enlightened" Jew felt such embarrassment, it is because the Oriental Jew was, as Trevisan Semi puts it, a sort of mirror, disturbingly reminding them of the times that preceded their integration into the nation. Consequently, it is no wonder that the French organization was

---

<sup>20</sup> TREVISAN SEMI 1998, 155.

<sup>21</sup> SARFATI 1999, 123-138.

<sup>22</sup> RODRIGUE 1989, 16.

so reluctant to act for the strange and disconcerting African Falashas claiming to be Jews, and assumed Nahoum's conclusions.<sup>23</sup>

But is it sufficient to say that this group's "primitivism" and archaic customs, so far away from modernity, caused too much embarrassment to those who aimed to integrate into the French society in order to explain the *Alliance* members' attitude? The Falashas' alleged lack of the necessary abilities to be educated (since they were part of Africa), cannot explain the hostility, or at least the skepticism, of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* toward the very principle of an educational project for the *Beta Israel*. Indeed, when the *Alliance* applied its educational methods in North Africa and Turkey, it aimed precisely to bring the Occidental culture to populations that did not have it. If the *Alliance* believed it was possible to provide Oriental Jews with an education, and consequently successfully established an international school network, why did it reject this same principle regarding the *Beta Israel* of Ethiopia, who represented a community just as destitute? How could we explain that the *Alliance* succeeded in overcoming, despite everything, its negative feelings towards the Oriental Jews, but succumbed to them in the case of the Ethiopian Jews? This question is strengthened given the fact that Nahoum himself recognized in his report that he had met Ethiopians who appreciated the European languages and cultures.<sup>24</sup> What prevented the Falashas from getting a modern education? The argumentative analysis of Nahoum's report can undoubtedly contribute in suggesting an answer to this question.

### **Nahoum and the "problem of the Falashas' origin"**

Nahoum's article consists of extracts from his correspondence with the *Alliance* in Paris, and is accompanied by three short comments from the *Bulletin's* editorial staff.<sup>25</sup> At once, a remark concerning the scenography, *i.e.* the scenario built by the discourse,<sup>26</sup> should be made:

---

<sup>23</sup> TREVISAN SEMI 2007, 27.

<sup>24</sup> NAHOUM 1908, 112; 113; 118.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 100; 106; 137.

<sup>26</sup> AMOSSY 2000, 61-66; 199.

by directly reporting Nahoum's speech and so making him stand on the front stage, the *Bulletin* wished to give the impression it was involved neither in the mission report, nor in its conclusions. And yet, the published excerpts were selected and Nahoum's main letter describing his actual expedition among the Falashas, with his observations and conclusions, were only "almost entirely" reproduced.<sup>27</sup> This not only means that the *Bulletin*'s editors were indeed involved in the text in a veiled way, but this involvement tends to confirm that Nahoum's conclusions were indeed in line with the *Alliance*'s wishes as regards the attitude that should be adopted towards the Falashas. Furthermore, a fifth of the article<sup>28</sup> is devoted to the warm reception held for the *Alliance*'s representative at the court of the Ethiopian emperor Menelik, which preceded Nahoum's journey in Falasha territory. There, Nahoum not only represented the Jews,<sup>29</sup> but also France. He was granted an audience with the emperor, receiving quite exceptional honors as an *étranger de marque*,<sup>30</sup> a distinguished foreigner, with the help of the *ministre de France* in Addis Ababa and the French consul.<sup>31</sup> Thus, by selecting Nahoum's letters, the *Alliance* showed itself in a positive light, as a French institution whose international status enabled it to directly address the Ethiopian authorities and the regional colonial administration.<sup>32</sup> Besides, prior to their publication, the letter extracts were sent to major Jewish world organizations and newspapers to publicize the *Alliance*.<sup>33</sup>

The French model of the Jews' integration into the Occident goes through Nahoum's entire article and can be found, for instance, in the account of the speech he gave to the Ethiopian emperor Menelik on March 6, 1908. Nahoum began by establishing a parallel between the people of Israel and Ethiopia, and so managed to speak of Israel's

<sup>27</sup> "Ce n'est que vers le 15 mars 1909 qu'il [Nahoum] put enfin faire parvenir à l'*Alliance* cet important document, qui est reproduit ici presque en entier" (NAHOUM 1908, 107).

<sup>28</sup> The first 8 pages (100-107) out of the article's 38 pages.

<sup>29</sup> NAHOUM 1908, 104.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-101; 103; 106.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 100; 118-119.

<sup>33</sup> PARFITT 1999, 6.

revival while complimenting the Ethiopian emperor, with whom the *Alliance* wished to establish a good relationship, by referring to the “blossoming of Ethiopia”.<sup>34</sup> As for Israel, if it succeeded in keeping its religious unity despite the persecutions it suffered in the past, its revival, according to Nahoum, was made possible in modern times. However, Israel’s great mission was not realized through the sole practice of its religious faith any more: thanks to the *Alliance*, “their living organism” as Nahoum put it, the Israelites could still work for humankind’s sake by “continuing their march toward progress”.<sup>35</sup> Thus the Jews, as it is outlined here, were first and foremost a religious group. As such, they were part of the Western society and consequently, were also a vector for modernism which, according to the contemporary dominant ideology, should have brought humankind to happiness.

What is the logic of Nahoum’s argument as regards the *Beta Israel*? Raising at once the “problem of the Falashas’ origins”,<sup>36</sup> Nahoum tried to show, from his field study, that the “Falasha race” belonged to Africa. According to him, a “group of judaïsing” people could have emigrated from Egypt in ancient times, to settle in Ethiopia.<sup>37</sup> These people must have converted the indigenous population to “Mosaïsm”, into which

---

<sup>34</sup> “Montrant, d’un coté, la grandeur morale de la mission d’Israël et, de l’autre, la haute puissance de l’Ethiopie ancienne, et comment le premier a pu, malgré les siècles d’ignorance et de persécution du moyen-âge, conserver son unité religieuse, et la seconde, son indépendance et son intégrité en dépit des différentes invasions, je suis arrivé à parler de la renaissance d’Israël et de la floraison de l’Ethiopie dans les temps modernes” (NAHOUM 1908, 101).

<sup>35</sup> “Les israélites et la science juive continuent leur marche vers le progrès, grâce à leur organisme vivant qui est l’*Alliance*, qui, en travaillant dans ce but, travaille aussi pour l’humanité en général” (*Ivi.*).

<sup>36</sup> “Comme on le verra, M. Nahoum se propose d’étudier plus tard avec tout le soin et la méthode nécessaire le problème si obscur de l’origine des Falachas...” (NAHOUM 1908, 107); “Ce problème des origines, je ne pourrai ici que l’effleurer, me réservant de le traiter ultérieurement dans une étude plus documentée...” (*Ibid.*, 108).

<sup>37</sup> “Les Falachas ont du être convertis au mosaïsme par un groupe de judaïsants venus d’Egypte vers le 2è ou 3è siècle avant l’ère chrétienne (...) En se fixant en Ethiopie, ce petit groupe d’immigrés aurait trouvé un terrain tout préparé pour faire accepter aux indigènes les principes mosaïstes (...) Le groupe, en grossissant, aurait donné naissance à des tribus guerrières...” (*Ibid.*, 134-135).

they would have subsequently integrated, until finally giving birth to independent warlike Falasha tribes. Consequently, the Falashas did not have any common ethnic origin with the people of Israel. In fact, the differences between them and their “fellow citizens of Christian faith”<sup>38</sup> were negligible, and apart from the religious traditions, they were first and foremost Ethiopians. That is why, according to Nahoum, an educational project in Ethiopia was useless.

Thus, except for claiming the Falashas were too few and too scattered, the core of Nahoum’s argument can almost be reduced to the following syllogism: “the African race can only gradually adhere to Occidental civilization; the Falashas are African; therefore the Falashas cannot benefit from the establishment of a school in Ethiopia”. The major premise postulates the inferiority of the non-European people: it is therefore not demonstrated since it was part of the beliefs and self-evidences in the socio-cultural sphere of that time. The minor premise, stating that the Falashas are ethnically, culturally and religiously Ethiopian, was induced by Nahoum from his empirical observations made in the field and accounted for throughout his report. The necessary conclusion is that the Falashas form an African population which cannot be educated according to the European methods.

Hence, from the image of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, symbolizing a Judaism integrated into the French nation and being also a vector for Occidental modernism, to an argument based on racial theories that establish a discrimination between the Europeans of Jewish religion and the Africans, the same identity model underlies Nahoum’s argumentation. Assuming the Jew can be fully integrated into the nation he belongs to, this model strongly underlined the religious-ethical dimension of Judaism, keeping the other ethnic and national dimensions in the background.

---

<sup>38</sup> “A part les traditions religieuses qui séparent les Falachas des Abyssins, rien ne les différencie de leurs concitoyens de religion chrétienne, avec lesquels ils vivent en parfaite harmonie” (*Ibid.*, 129).

## French Jews, Oriental Jews and Ethiopian Jews

But how does this model determine the *Alliance's* different relations towards the Oriental and Ethiopian Jews? Admittedly, the *Alliance's* somewhat contemptuous attitude towards the Jews of the Orient and Africa can indeed be explained by the emancipated Jews' desire to blend into the hosting society and to forget the times that preceded emancipation. However, the *Alliance* did not hesitate to help the Oriental Jews, since recognizing them as co-religionists and providing them with the means of emancipation did not call into question neither the identity model that allowed integration into the nation, nor the Occidental Jews' own emancipation.

The *Beta Israel's* case is more problematic. For the discovery of those "distant brothers", deprived of all contact with their co-religionists,<sup>39</sup> who are also Ethiopian and Black, raised at once, in the eurocentrist thinking, the question of the common origins. This is why the "so obscure problem" of the Falashas' origin, as Nahoum put it,<sup>40</sup> is a central theme of his report. Having discovered Black Brothers might have indeed reintroduced the Jewish identity ethnic dimension, that as one hoped was definitively forgotten, but which implicitly remained, despite everything, a current issue. Already looming large with the antisemitism unleashed during the Dreyfus Affair, the failure of the identity model implemented during the French revolution and defended by the *Alliance*, would become overwhelming some thirty years later. Whereas the principle of integrating Jews into humanity was introduced by the Enlightenment's universalism and humanism, racism and antisemitism aimed inherently at excluding "Negroes" and Jews precisely from such an idea of enlightened humanity.<sup>41</sup>

Consequently, the Falashas, those Black Jews doubly placed on the enlightened humanity's edge, confronted the emancipated Jews with

---

<sup>39</sup> "Depuis que l'attention du monde israélite a été appelée sur ces frères lointains, privés de tout contact avec leurs coreligionnaires, et que de louables efforts avaient été tentés pour se rapprocher d'eux, on s'est demandé quelle pouvait être l'origine des Falachas" (*Ibid.*, 107-108).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>41</sup> SARFATI 1999, 160-162.

an image much more difficult to tolerate than the one reflected by the Oriental Jews. Whereas the latter only revealed a difference that emancipation wished to forget through integration, the Black Jews pointed toward the proximity to the Occidental culture's margins, and called into question the very validity of the emancipation and its corollary identity model. To admit a common origin with the Falashas would have reintroduced the Jewish identity ethnic dimension that the emancipated Jew tried to repress, and would have implied the inevitable recognition that he could not be fully integrated into the Occident. That would explain why Nahoum considered it impossible to apply in Ethiopia the educational methods practiced by the *Alliance* in Morocco or Turkey, whereas he was well aware there were occidentalized Ethiopians. For it would be more compromising, from the perspective of a common origin, to get closer to a Black African community than to Jews who were non-occidentalized but white.<sup>42</sup>

One now better understands why, from Halévy's 1868 journey to Ethiopia, the French organization did not undertake any concrete action in favour of the *Beta Israel*, and adopted a passive neutrality.<sup>43</sup> When it finally sent a mission to Ethiopia, following the polemic with the Italian Pro-Falasha Committee created as a result of Faitlovitch's efforts, the *Alliance*'s conclusions were negative. It seems that in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Jews of France, and the *Alliance*, could not recognize the *Beta Israel* as "brothers" without calling into question their own place in the Occident. It was this ideological interest which would determine the relation of the *Alliance*, an institution that occupied a dominant place in the European Jewish world, toward the marginal Ethiopian Jewry. The polemic regarding the school project for the *Beta Israel* reflected in fact two opposing identity models. Faitlovitch and Rabbi Margulies, the Italian committee president, were much closer to the traditional orthodox model than to the secular French one.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> The term "white" did not apply only to Europeans, as Nahoum pointed out in his report. "...à peine y-a-t-il [à Addis Ababa] un millier de blancs (européens, arméniens, indous)..." (NAHOUM 1908, 110).

<sup>43</sup> TREVISAN SEMI 2007, 27.

<sup>44</sup> TREVISAN SEMI 1998, 146; 153.

## Faitlovitch's Argumentative Strategy

In his own report published in German in 1910, Faitlovitch severely criticized the French representative's conclusions. According to Faitlovitch, the errors that are in almost every sentence of the French mission report, are mainly explained by the fact that it was not a scientific expedition.<sup>45</sup> Since Nahoum did not spend enough time exploring a relatively wide area,<sup>46</sup> his mission could not lead to convincing results. However, it was Nahoum himself who was under Faitlovitch's attack throughout the report.

For example, Faitlovitch related an incident which took place in Adenkato, a village in the Tigray region, after he had met the *Alliance's* mission on June 21, 1908.<sup>47</sup> In this passage, Faitlovitch reported the conversation he had with two villagers about Nahoum's visit the previous day. This dialogue is properly staged by Faitlovitch, thus enabling him to criticize Nahoum while concealing himself behind the villagers' direct testimony. What did Faitlovitch hold against Nahoum? First, Rabbi Nahoum did not behave as a Jew should have when he continued his journey on Saturday, without marking the *Sabbath* rest! As a consequence, he was regarded with suspicion by the local population that, as for itself, respected this biblical precept. Doing so, Nahoum harmed not only himself but also Faitlovitch, the European Jews and the educational project that might be now rejected by the Falashas. Moreover, since he did not know the local language and culture, Nahoum could not communicate directly with the Falashas he met.<sup>48</sup> Consequently, reservations should be expressed with regard

---

<sup>45</sup> FAITLOVITCH 1910, 124; 172.

<sup>46</sup> Nahoum stayed for only one month in Falasha territory. (PARFITT 1999, 10).

<sup>47</sup> It is also referred to this example in TREVISAN SEMI 2007, 49-50. This passage is taken from Faitlovitch's correspondence in French to Rabbi Margulies, dated 01.12.1908 (FAITLOVITCH COLLECTION, file 120). A widened version was inserted in the report published in German (FAITLOVITCH 1910, 47-49), but was deleted from the Hebrew version published in 1959.

<sup>48</sup> "Voici l'éthiopisant diplômé par Mr. Bigart [the *Alliance's* general secretary]" is one of Faitlovitch's colorful expressions to describe Nahoum (Manuscript entitled "Mission chez les Falachas d'Abyssinie", FAITLOVITCH COLLECTION, file 120).



to Nahoum's conclusions, which having been based on information obtained indirectly, were likely to be partial or inaccurate

This example is also interesting since, in our opinion, it seems rather characteristic of an argumentative strategy recurring in many of Faitlovitch's texts. This strategy rests on an extensive use of pathos - the emotions and mood that, according to Aristotelian traditional rhetoric, are evoked from the audience by the discourse. Indeed, Faitlovitch described the Falashas he met, representative of their entire community, as annoyed and furious towards what they considered to be an imposture by the foreigners visiting their region. For them, since Nahoum did not respect the *saint Samedi*<sup>49</sup> day of rest, he had to be Christian, and in the same manner, Faitlovitch undoubtedly had misled them when he had offered to establish a Jewish school there. By underlining the Rabbi's transgression of a fundamental religious law, Faitlovitch not only justified the villagers' anger, but also aimed at arousing his Jewish readers' negative feeling towards the *Alliance*'s representative, and thus making them reject the latter's conclusions. Furthermore, by showing that the *Beta Israel* shared the same values with the traditional European Jews, Faitlovitch made his audience feel empathy towards them, which would likely lead to identifying with them.

Faitlovitch's recurring use of pathos seems to confirm that an argumentative goal, if not a polemical one, permeates throughout most of his writings. As Summerfield rightly pointed out, Faitlovitch's publications tended to underline the similarities between the *Beta Israel* and the other Jews and to minimize the differences, whereas his unpublished writings tended to be more objective in their analysis.<sup>50</sup> As Summerfield puts it:

Faitlovitch's motivation behind his inaccurate portrayal of the Falashas in his publications was to detach them from their Ethiopian context and to make them more "palatable" and acceptable to world Jewry. Indeed, he often knowingly distorted the facts, belittled the differences between the Falashas's religion and normative Judaism and purported unsubstantiated

---

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, Letter to Rabbi Margulies dated 01.12.1908.

<sup>50</sup> SUMMERFIELD 2003, 153.

explanations for the aforementioned discrepancies to achieve this objective.<sup>51</sup>

In other words, Summerfield describes here the discursive strategy adopted by Faitlovitch who, from a pragmatic argumentative perspective, fitted his discourse to his audience - a necessary stage to a successful argumentation -<sup>52</sup> by creating an image of the *Beta Israel* in accordance with the European Jews' own premises and values.

But how can this argumentative objective be explained? According to Summerfield, Faitlovitch had simply accepted that the *Beta Israel* were part of the Jewish people, even before he met them in Ethiopia during his first visit.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, when he campaigned for the "Jews of Ethiopia," Faitlovitch contributed to "the creation of a Jewish identity for the Falashas," whose history had always been within Ethiopia.<sup>54</sup>

This explanation seems rather problematic. First, Faitlovitch was a "schnorrer" and a skilled fundraiser who, till his death in Tel-Aviv, persistently defended the *Beta Israel*'s cause, which, over time, became his own.<sup>55</sup> Consequently, Faitlovitch's argumentation had certainly been determined by various objectives and interests, that should necessarily be taken into account when considering his writings. Moreover, when Summerfield states - as Nahoum did - that the Falashas were not Jews since they were closer, culturally, religiously and socially, to their Christian neighbours rather than to traditional Judaism,<sup>56</sup> he narrows down the Jewish identity's ethical dimension. Neither is he explicit about the Jewish identity model on which he bases his own argumentation. Finally, he does not consider the possibility that Faitlovitch's argumentation is based on a different identity model. Faitlovitch's strong criticism of Nahoum's conclusions, as well as the induced empathy and identification toward the *Beta Israel*, allow us to assume his writings are grounded on another Jewish identity model. It

---

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>52</sup> PERELMAN and OLBRECHTS-TYTECA 1970, 9.

<sup>53</sup> SUMMERFIELD 2003, 42.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 129-130.

<sup>55</sup> TREVISAN SEMI 2007, 6.

<sup>56</sup> SUMMERFIELD 2003, 129.

is a model in which the ethical dimension highlights the human choice, at least as determinant in individuals' or groups' life as the social, cultural or historical constraints. In our opinion, Faitlovitch regarded the *Beta Israel* as full Jews, because they shared with the people of Israel the same myths of origin, respected exclusively and devotedly the Mosaic precepts, and also saw Israel's destiny as their own. Thus, the examination of the linguistic and argumentative dimension of Faitlovitch's writings, within the framework of a research in history of discourse, seems not only justified but necessary in order to draw the identity models as the objectives that underlie these texts, thereby better understanding how they determine the argumentation and the adopted attitude towards the *Beta Israel*'s Jewish identity.

## Bibliography

- AMOSSY R., *L'argumentation dans le discours – Discours politique, littérature d'idées, fiction, collection fac*, Paris, Nathan, 2000.
- AMOSSY R., "The Argumentative Dimension of Discourse", in VAN EEMEREN F.H. and HOUTLOSSER P. (eds.), *Argumentation in Practice*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2005, 87-98.
- AMOSSY R., "Argumentation et Analyse du discours: Perspectives théoriques et découpages disciplinaires", *Argumentation et Analyse du discours*, 1, 2008, in <http://aad.revues.org>.
- BENBASSA E. (ed.), *Un grand rabbin sépharade en politique, 1892-1923*, Paris, Presses du CNRS, 1990.
- BEN RAFAËL E., *Qu'est-ce qu'être Juif? Suivi de 50 sages répondent à Ben-Gourion (1958)*, Collection voix et regards, Paris, Balland, 2001.
- FAITLOVITCH J., *Quer durch Abessinien: Meine zweite Reise zu den Falaschas*, Berlin, Poppelauer, 1910.
- GUILHAUMOU J., *Discours et événement – L'histoire langagière des concepts*, Série linguistique et sémiotique n.47, Besançon, Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2006.
- KAPLAN S., *The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia: From Earliest times to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, New York, N.Y. University Press, 1992.
- NAHOUM H., "Mission chez les Falachas d'Abyssinie", *Bulletin de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle*, 33, Paris, 1908, 100-137.
- PARFITT T., "Rabbi Nahoum's Anthropological Mission to Ethiopia", in

- PARFITT T. and TREVISAN SEMI E. (eds.), *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel: Studies on Ethiopian Jews*, Richmond, Curzon, 1999, 1-14.
- PERELMAN C. and OLBRECHTS-TYTECA L., *Traité de l'argumentation - La nouvelle rhétorique*, Bruxelles, Presses de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1970.
- RODRIGUE A., *De l'instruction à l'émancipation – Les enseignants de l'Alliance israélite universelle et les Juifs d'Orient, 1860-1939*, Collection Diaspora, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1989.
- SARFATI G.E., *Discours ordinaire et identités juives - La représentation des Juifs et du judaïsme dans les dictionnaires et les encyclopédies du Moyen-âge au XXè siècle*, Paris, Berg International, 1999.
- SUMMERFIELD D., *From Falashas to Ethiopian Jews: the External Influences for Change c.1860-1960*, London and New York, Routledge Curzon, 2003.
- TREVISAN SEMI E., "Faitlovitch, Margulies and The Alliance Israélite: Which Educational Policy for the Ethiopian Jews in 1907?", in CROWN A.D. (ed.), *Noblesse Oblige - Essays in Honour of David Kessler OBE*, London, Vallentine Mitchell, 1998, 145-159.
- TREVISAN SEMI E., *Jacques Faitlovitch and the Jews of Ethiopia*, London, Vallentine Mitchell, 2007.
- WALDMAN M., *Beyond the Rivers of Ethiopia - The Jews of Ethiopia and the Jewish People*, Israel, Ministry of Defence, 1989. (in Hebrew)

### Archives

FAITLOVITCH COLLECTION, Sourasky Central Library, Tel Aviv University, file 120.

# EAST AND WEST THROUGH THE CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN JACQUES FAITLOVITCH AND FARID KASSAB

*Emanuela Trevisan Semi, University of Ca' Foscari, Venice, Italy*

## Introduction

In this chapter, we examine the correspondence between Jacques Faitlovitch, the Polish Jew who planned to regenerate Western Judaism through the “true” Oriental Semitic spirit, and Farid Djirdji Kassab, the Greek Orthodox Christian, who claimed to be a native of Syria, Lebanon, and the Holy Land, by virtue of being born in Nablus in 1884. Kassab planned to regenerate the Ottoman Empire and later the Near East through the Jewish and Semitic spirit. Jacques Faitlovitch (1881-1955), who worked on behalf of the *Beta Israel* and their integration into the mainstream Jewish world, was a scholar, a traveller, a Zionist, and a missionary.<sup>1</sup> Farid Kassab (1884-1970) was the author of *Le nouvel empire arabe: la curie romaine et le prétendu peril juif universel*,<sup>2</sup> and worked as a dentist all his life.

Wild, who had access to material given to him by Kassab’s daughter in Beirut and wrote about Kassab, provides some valuable biographical information.<sup>3</sup> Kassab’s father was born in Nablus in 1847 and was an Ottoman civil servant before he became a grain merchant and travelled widely. Some evidence of his activity can be found also in the two letters written in Arabic found in the Faitlovitch archive. Farid Kassab studied in Jaffa, then at the Jesuits’ College in Beirut,

---

<sup>1</sup> For more on Faitlovitch, see TREVISAN SEMI 2007.

<sup>2</sup> KASSAB 1906.

<sup>3</sup> WILD 1988.

which he left a few years later having rejected the type of education offered, viewing it as obscurantist and oppressive. The young man then attended the Greek Catholic Patriarchal College until 1902. The following year in Paris, while endeavouring to study philosophy but being forced to study dentistry by his father, he met Jacques Faitlovitch. And it is as a successful dentist in Alexandria that he resumed contact with Faitlovitch 17 years later.

In Paris the young Kassab frequented three different sets of people: the Orientalists, among whom he mentions Joseph Halévy, Faitlovitch's teacher, which is probably how the two students met, the Lebanese and young Ottomans, the Russian revolutionaries and French socialists.<sup>4</sup>

Kassab was basically a loyal subject of the Ottoman Empire, something he viewed as undoubtedly superior to other scenarios which were taking shape insofar as it was well-established and offered greater stability than emerging Arab nationalism, which Kassab viewed as dangerous and threatening.

The correspondence between Faitlovitch and Kassab shows a real friendship that was underscored by a strong sharing of values, starting from the Parisian years at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Paris served as an incubator of ideas for many Jews who had come from Eastern Europe full of dreams of personal and national redemption, while searching for somewhere else located in the mythical "Orient", a place of imaginative passion. Through an exchange of letters written in French between these two special protagonists of last century it will be possible to shed new light on the place that the "Orient" and the "Oriental Semitic spirit" played as a point of reference and identity not only for Jews but also for orthodox Christians living in the Ottoman Empire.

### **The Common Denominator between Kassab and Faitlovitch**

In one of his letters dating from 1906, Kassab quotes a friend of his from Jaffa as follows:

---

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 610-614.

Our Orient...is annihilated, humiliated, degenerated, not aware of its identity, and will be so even in the future because it has been crushed by its rulers [and] persecuted by the dominating powers. It will become like Egypt. European progress has already penetrated it and sooner or later this will be its civilization while only a few morsels of its previous culture will be left. Now it's the West's turn. It is flooding all over the world with its spirit and its economic issues are throwing everything into confusion. The Orient is becoming Europeanized and nobody can stop these changes. The Arabs, split, too independent, lazy and mediocre will share the fate of the Algerians (...).<sup>5</sup>

Kassab goes on to add that his friend laughed at him when he spoke of the views that he shared with the Jew Faitlovitch about a revival of the Semites and a union of all Semitic religions, maintaining that all these were just dreams, “scaffoldings” and constructions that will be destroyed by Turkey and that nobody would respond to a Semitic appeal.

The concept of a “Semitic appeal,” whose meaning was an invitation to all the Semites to restore the ancient “pure” spirit of the Orient, the realm of the spirit versus the materiality of the West, is central in this correspondence. The keywords in these letters are the moral values of the East, the common Semitic legacy of pure shared moral and behavioural codes, Eastern feelings, common ethnic roots and the spiritual values of the Semitic race versus the Arian race.

During the years spent in Paris the two young friends, Faitlovitch and Kassab, fantasized about the mystique of an imaginative East inhabited by the old Semites whose legacy can be found in the Bible, a shared field of identity, a reality constructed in the Eastern space, the possible location of old-new nations. According to them, the “true” values of the Bible, that is to say religion associated with morals, had been contaminated in Europe by the powerful Catholic Church which influenced the Jews living in their territories. In the eyes of Faitlovitch, the Jews in the East and, even more, those in Africa (specifically, the *Beta Israel*) had been less contaminated and alienated by the Christian

---

<sup>5</sup> KASSAB, Letter of 29.07.1906. The correspondence can be found in the Faitlovitch Collection in Sourasky Central Library in Tel Aviv University (file 117).

European spirit so that they could help to restore the ancient Biblical and Semitic spirit among all the world's Jews. In the eyes of Kassab, Arab Christians in the Orient also kept some ancient Biblical and Semitic values lost in the West and together with other authentic Semites, the Jews, who were part of the same ethnic stock, could bring a new breath of life to corrupted bodies. That is why he favoured the immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe to Palestine. In his mind these Jews were neither Western nor Ashkenazi Jews but pure Oriental Jews, similar to the Orientalising Christians from the East.

Yaron Peleg, quoting the main character of a semi-autobiographical novel by Benjamin Disraeli,<sup>6</sup> speaks of a young English nobleman who wishes to reinvent himself and revive his English society through a “spiritually rejuvenating journey to the Holy land” and adds that the “book suggests that the Semitic peoples of the East hold the key to the renewal of Western society.”<sup>7</sup> Half a century later, we find the same concept expressed in the conversations of two young people, one coming from a Jewish Ashkenazi background, and the other of Syrian Christian Orthodox origin.

### **The Correspondence between Faitlovitch and Kassab**

In this chapter, we intend to examine seven letters found in the Faitlovitch archive written to Jacques Faitlovitch by Farid Kassab.<sup>8</sup> Four of these letters were written in Paris in 1906-07; and three letters were written in Alexandria between 1928 and 1929, where Kassab worked as a dentist. The letters written in Paris refer to the period of writing and publication of Kassab's first book *Le Nouvel Empire*

---

<sup>6</sup> DISRAELI 1847.

<sup>7</sup> PELEG 2005, 7.

<sup>8</sup> One postcard is dated 12.12.1907, another postcard is dated 18.12.1907 from Belgrade, a six-page letter is dated 29.7.1906. A four-page undated letter from Paris was probably sent in 1906. Another four-page letter is dated 4.6.1907, an eleven-page letter is dated 8.7.1907, an eight-page letter is dated 16.4.1928, a three-page letter is from 4.9.1928, a four-page letter is from 11.4.1929. There are also two letters in Arabic from Kassab's father. I thank Simha Zaharur and Haim Admor for their help.



*Arabe, La curie romaine et le prétendu péril juif universel*,<sup>9</sup> a response to the book *Le Réveil de la nation arabe* by the Syrian educator Azoury.<sup>10</sup> In order to publish the book, Kassab asked Faitlovitch to recommend a small publishing house that might be interested. The letters of 1906 and 1907 concern the period when Faitlovitch had just returned from his first mission to Ethiopia, bringing back two young Ethiopians, Gete Yirmiahu and Taamerat Emmanuel, who were to study at the *Alliance* schools in Paris, before being sent to Florence under the guidance of Margulies. The letter dated 16th April 1928 was written on the occasion of the first meeting, in Alexandria, between the two friends, after they had been separated for 17 years.

In 1928 Faitlovitch had come to Alexandria from Tel Aviv and was about to undertake his seventh mission to Ethiopia.<sup>11</sup> He was due to set off in July in the company of his sister Lea, who was to assist him as an English teacher at the school in Addis Ababa (1928-1929). The letter dated 4 September 1928 was written a few months after Faitlovitch set off for Ethiopia, while Kassab believed he was still in Palestine. In the last letter in our possession (dated 11th April 1929) Kassab replied to Faitlovitch, on his way back from Ethiopia, to inform him of his passage to Port Said, apologising for not coming to see him due to a heavy dose of flu.

We know that Faitlovitch continued to receive news of Kassab from Taamerat Emmanuel (he probably met Faitlovitch's friend while studying in Paris), who had fled to Egypt after having been forced to leave Ethiopia because he was wanted by the Italian authorities.<sup>12</sup> Taamerat wrote to Faitlovitch in 1937 to tell him that Kassab had helped him find accommodation in Alexandria. He had met Kassab "by chance, having believed he was in Syria" and he even offered him full hospitality.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> The book was published in Paris in 1906 and I thank Stefan Wild for providing me with a xerox of his own copy of this rare book. There are only two copies: one in the New York Public Library and another in the British Museum Library.

<sup>10</sup> AZOURY 1905.

<sup>11</sup> TREVISAN SEMI 2007

<sup>12</sup> TREVISAN SEMI 2000; WEIL 2010 (forthcoming).

<sup>13</sup> TREVISAN SEMI 2000, 256: Letter of 21.9.1937.

In another letter dated 1940, Taamerat passed on Kassab's greetings to his friend Faitlovitch, telling him that he was shortly to visit him in Tel Aviv, accompanied by a relative.<sup>14</sup>

We know from Wild that Kassab stayed in Egypt until 1964, when at the age of 80 he returned to Beirut, where he died in 1970.<sup>15</sup> It is therefore highly likely that in 1944-1945, when Faitlovitch settled in Cairo as *conseiller* to the Ethiopian Embassy in Egypt, he continued to see Kassab, even though there are no documents pertaining to this latter period of their lives.

What is interesting about this correspondence is above all the issues which emerge, shedding further light on the thoughts of Faitlovitch regarding what he considered to be the moral values of the East, as opposed to the decadence of the West. Faitlovitch and Kassab believed that it was necessary to "reawaken" the people they refer to as "Semitic", meaning both Arabs and Jews. Although we do not have Faitlovitch's replies to Kassab, Kassab may have rid himself of this potentially risky material during the civil war in Lebanon, a theory which is supported by Wild,<sup>16</sup> the material we do have provides a clear picture of the influence that Faitlovitch, only three years older, had on the young eastern Christian. In perusing material on Jacques Faitlovitch, one is struck by Faitlovitch's power of seduction and influence that he exerted on the people he met, though he rarely managed to maintain the initial rapport.

In the letters it is interesting to observe the use of terms that reflect the language of the era; for example, the term "Semitic" refers to people and not just language, while "Eastern" is used to refer to anything which cannot be described as "Western," and in the later letters the term "Semitic race" is used in opposition to the term "Arian race."

---

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 304: Letter of 28.1.1940.

<sup>15</sup> WILD 1988, 627.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 607.

### The “Semitic appeal” for Kassab and Faitlovitch

In his letters dated 1906-1907 Kassab talks of a “Semitic appeal” (*appel sémitique*), a term which suggests that he and Faitlovitch shared the same ideas on the need to ‘reawaken’ those designated as “Semitic,” namely the Jews and the Arabs. The two populations were viewed as the heirs to a common legacy of shared pure moral and behavioural codes, which had been corrupted by Western decadence. The originally pure “East” had degenerated due to a kind of identity crisis, and had been influenced by the materialistic “West,” which could nonetheless still be saved and reborn. Kassab wrote: “Who better than the Semite can teach morals? The Semite has experienced and felt morals. Everywhere else religion was separated from morals; only for the Semite were conduct and religion identical and inseparable.”<sup>17</sup>

However in the eyes of Kassab and Faitlovitch the “Semitic East” lay dormant and required someone to awaken it from its slumber: they were the new prophets who would “preach as prophets” (*sermoner en prophète*), to quote Kassab. The two friends were to share the task: the young Greek Orthodox Christian would preach to the Eastern Christian world, while the young Polish Jew would do likewise with the Jewish world. Faitlovitch’s work was motivated by the need to introduce new lifeblood into a Jewish people corrupted by the spirit of the West, and this is what led him to seek out the Jews of Ethiopia. The role of the prophet awakening the sleeping conscience was one which suited both Faitlovitch and Kassab.

Much has been written on the role of this regeneration ideology in the founding of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* in France, and in the development of the network of schools established by the *Alliance* for Jews from Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa. Joseph Halévy had already widely used the term “regeneration” and his teaching was not limited to academic learning but extended to a commitment to the Jewish cause, in this case the ideology of the education and regeneration of

---

<sup>17</sup> KASSAB, Letter of 16.4.1928: “Qui mieux que le sémite enseigne la morale? Il l’a vécu, il l’a senti. Partout la religion était autre chose que la morale, pour le sémite seulement conduite et religion étaient identiques et inséparables.”

the Asian and African communities. Faitlovitch, greatly influenced by Halévy, was widely committed to the same line of thought and action with the aim of giving rise to a movement to reawaken the African Jewish communities from their long period of hibernation. He expected the Eastern Jews (which in his vocabulary included the *Beta Israel* or Ethiopian Jews), who had preserved the pure values of the ancient Jewish tradition, to regenerate Western Jewish religion once awakened from their torpor. He expected a sort of circular process that would start moving towards the regeneration of the East but lead back to the regeneration of the West.

This was the common ground between Kassab and Faitlovitch. Both looked down on Western materialism and believed that only their own people, the Eastern Christians and the Jews, had the power to decrease the rising materialism in the East and the loss of traditional values.

According to Kassab, the Ottoman Empire would be able to guarantee that “Oriental” traditions and values were respected, but with the arrival of European powers, these guarantees would be swept away.<sup>18</sup> This is why Kassab looked favourably on the arrival of Jewish colonists from Eastern Europe in Palestine and feared the interference of the Pope and the Catholic world in his “East,” so much so that he even wrote a pamphlet against Azoury’s book, criticising the interference of the Roman Church and the risk of developing Arab nationalism. He asserted in 1906 that the Jews had no wish to establish their own nation but merely to return to where they had started. Wild rightly noted that Kassab “may have been the only non-Jewish Arab who came out openly in favour of the Zionist movement at that time,” and quotes the following phrase from Kassab’s diary, offering a significant insight into his thoughts: “The Orient needed the Jews more than the Jews needed the Orient. ...Jews and Arabs, racially Semites and culturally Semites, ought to complement each other.”<sup>19</sup>

Kassab who had personally witnessed the first wave of Jewish

---

<sup>18</sup> KASSAB 1906, 33 wrote: “L’Orient appartient aux orientaux sous la domination ottomane.”

<sup>19</sup> WILD 1988, 609.

immigration, wrote in his book that the immigrants were “poor, humble, pacific Jewish families who had maintained their Eastern feelings and were fleeing oppression or massacre in deepest Russia or Poland”<sup>20</sup> and that “these Jewish populations are inoffensive, do immense good for the country, and are people animated by the same sentiments that animate the indigenous populations, and belong to the same origin, the Semitic race”.<sup>21</sup> The belief expressed in the letters (even in those dating from the end of the twenties) was that Jews and Arabs belonged to the same ethnic stock, *la race sémitique*, and that the Semites, Jews and Arabs together had positive values to offer and the power to regenerate the West.

Paris at the beginning of the twentieth century had been a seedbed for various ideas and ideologies, including: pan-Semitism, pan-Hebraism, and pan-Judaism.<sup>22</sup> Much attention was paid to the teaching of Semitic languages, which were mainly taught by Jewish academics. One of these academics, Joseph Halévy, Kassab’s teacher, was also the first to teach Hebrew in Hebrew, and was the proponent of the rebirth and therefore also of the regeneration of the Hebrew language. Halévy, who was convinced of the pre-eminence of the language question within the context of a national renaissance, undoubtedly had a great influence on the young students who attended his courses. Wild notes that: “Kassab had been very impressed by his Jewish professors in Paris,” mentioning Bergson, Halévy, Derenbourg, Durkheim, Lévy-Bruhl and Reinach in particular.<sup>23</sup> Another Jewish professor that Kassab probably met was Nahum Slouschz, professor of Hebrew language and Hebrew and Jewish literature at the *Sorbonne*, and a friend of Faitlovitch. Like Kassab and Faitlovich, Slouschz also dreamed of a Semitic East. He searched for ancient traces in archaeological sites hoping to discover

---

<sup>20</sup> KASSAB 1906, 39 wrote: “Pauvres familles juives, humbles et paisibles qui ont gardé les sentiments orientaux et qui fuient une oppression ou un massacre dans les profondeurs de la Russie et de la Pologne”.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*: “Ces populations juives sont inoffensives, qu’elles apportent un bien immense au pays, que se sont des hommes animés des mêmes sentiments que les indigènes et qu’ils appartiennent à la même souche, à la race sémitique.”

<sup>22</sup> TREVISAN SEMI 2007, 6-11.

<sup>23</sup> WILD 1988, 617.

the great Semitic Empire on the shores of the Mediterranean whose language had been Hebrew or Aramaic. In brief, the Parisian context for the study of Semitic languages was favourable to ideologies propounding a recovery of Semitic roots, linguistically, culturally, and politically – a movement collectively known as pan-Semitism. This discourse undoubtedly influenced the two young men.

In his letter dated 29 July 1906, Kassab, in terms which must have been common to Faitlovitch too, writes of a “revival of the Semites” (*relèvement des semites*), “union of religions” (*union des religions*), “Jewish-Semitic work” (*oeuvre judéo-semitique*), “making peace between the Church and the Synagogue” (*reconcilier l’Eglise et la synagogue*), all of which were different ways of referring to the “Semitic appeal” (*appel sémitique*) I quoted earlier.<sup>24</sup> It is strange that in the letters from the Parisian period, Kassab talks of his own “conversion to Judaism” or “Judaisation,”<sup>25</sup> which as far as we can make out he views as a personal development. He had written about his “Judaism” in the following terms: “My Judaism, all my conservative, gentle Judaism cannot deliver me from despair.”<sup>26</sup> Although this conversion should be viewed in a metaphoric sense, as a sentimental and cultural introduction to Judaism, it is still one of the first examples of the proselytising and evangelical facet which later came to the forefront in the life and work of Faitlovitch.<sup>27</sup>

In a letter from the Parisian period, Kassab writes about the influence that his friend had on him in the following terms: “You were the nourishment for my thoughts and dreams, the source I drank from for so long.”<sup>28</sup> The “Judaism” Kassab refers to, and which in some way must have influenced his work against Azoury, undoubtedly came from Faitlovitch.

---

<sup>24</sup> FN. 14 OP. CIT.

<sup>25</sup> KASSAB, Letter of 8.7.1907.

<sup>26</sup> KASSAB, Letter of 29.7.1906: “Et mon judaïsme, tout mon judaïsme conservateur et doux ne pourra pas me délivrer au désespoir.”

<sup>27</sup> TREVISAN SEMI 2007, 65-87.

<sup>28</sup> KASSAB, Letter of 8.7.1907. “Vous fûtes mon nourissier en rêves et en pensées, la source d’où je me suis longtemps abreuvé.”

Faitlovitch is described by his friend as “firm, patient, hard-working, persevering, reflective and melancholic.”<sup>29</sup> From my own research on Faitlovitch, the terms “patient” and “reflective” just do not appear the most appropriate to describe him.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the young Faitlovitch was more patient and reflective than he was in his later years, but it was in 1906-07 that the dispute with the *Alliance* began, and from the correspondence with Rabbi Zvi Margulies we know that the latter urged him to be less impulsive. This was therefore probably Kassab’s idealised image of his friend.

In the last letter from Alexandria in 1929, Kassab declares that he is ready to work on a project that Faitlovitch, just back from his seventh mission to Ethiopia, had set aside for him, but of which nothing more is known, as the letter describing it has been lost. Kassab wrote: “The time has certainly come for us to work on the project we hold dear, and if we do not work for this idea, who will? and we are getting old!”<sup>31</sup> We know little about the project Faitlovitch is talking about after, but it may have been the initiative aimed at hosting and educating the young Ethiopian Jews that Faitlovitch always brought back from his missions, or it may have been a project promoting the Eastern Church or Judaisation in a broader sense, something to which Faitlovitch was very committed.<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusion

The correspondence between Faitlovitch and Kassab offers valuable insight into the Judaising context of Semitic studies in Paris at the beginning of the twentieth century and the discourse on pan-Semitism which impacted on the young people of those years, even those who were not Jewish.

---

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, “Ferme, patient, laboureux, perseverant, réfléchi, mélancolique.”

<sup>30</sup> TREVISAN SEMI 2007.

<sup>31</sup> KASSAB, Letter of 11.4.29: “Certes l’heure est venue pour travailler à l’idée qui nous est chère, si nous ne travaillons pas qui travaillera, et nous devenons vieux!”

<sup>32</sup> PARFITT and TREVISAN SEMI 2002.

The need to introduce new life into the Jewish people, corrupted by the spirit of the West and the search for the spirit of the East, led Faitlovitch to seek out the *Beta Israel* of East Africa and other Jews in far away places in order to discover a “great Semitic Empire” on the shores of the Mediterranean, whose language had been Hebrew or Aramaic.

The risk of the decline of the Ottoman Empire, the birth of new nationalist movements, and the quest for new identities based on the reinvention of a legendary past, contributed to the general ideological environment. Faitlovitch and Kassab are good examples of this phenomenon and the contexts in which they moved freely, both mentally and physically, extending over large territories, including Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon and Syria, incorporating the old Ottoman Empire and Paris.

## Bibliography

- AZOURY N., *Le réveil de la nation arabe*, Paris, Plon, 1905.
- DISRAELI B., *Tancred, or the new Crusade*, London, Colburn, 1847.
- KASSAB F., *Nouvel Empire arabe: La curie romaine et le prétendu péril juif universel*, Paris, V.Giard et E. Brière, 1906.
- PARFITT T. and TREVISAN SEMI E., *Judaizing Movements: Studies in the margins of Judaism*, London, RoutledgeCurzon, 2002.
- PELEG Y., *Orientalism and the Hebrew Imagination*, New York, Cornell University Press, 2005.
- TREVISAN SEMI E., *L'epistolario di Taamrat Emmanuel, un intellettuale ebreo d'Etiopia nella prima metà del XX secolo/La corrispondance de Taamrat Emmanuel, intellectuel juif d'Ethiopie dans la première moitié du XXème siècle*, Torino, L'Harmattan Italia, 2000.
- TREVISAN SEMI E., *Jacques Faitlovitch and the Jews of Ethiopia*, London, Vallentine Mitchell, 2007.
- WEIL S., “Taamerat Ammanuel”, in UHLIG S. (ed.), *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2010 (forthcoming).
- WILD S., “Ottomanism versus Arabism, the case of Farid Kassab (1884-1979)”, *Die Welt des Islams*, 28, 1988, 607-627.



“AN OBLIGATION OF HONOUR”:  
GLIMPSES OF THE FORGOTTEN STORY  
OF THE PRO-FALASHA COMMITTEE IN GERMANY

*Alice Jankowski, Institute für die Geschichte der deutschen  
Juden, Hamburg, Germany*

## **Introduction**

Ever since the Scottish voyager James Bruce described the unique Ethiopian group the Falasha at the end of the eighteenth century,<sup>1</sup> the discussion of the existence, migration, and survival of Jews in Ethiopia among a broader European Jewish and non-Jewish public alike was facilitated by the dissemination of journals and newspapers, enhanced by an overall progress in communications.<sup>2</sup> The nineteenth century Enlightenment period influenced not only the attitude to the Jews in various Western and central European countries, but also increased the economic, political, and missionary intentions and interests in different groups in overseas regions. At the same time, the Christian churches enforced their idea of missionizing the Jews, not only in Europe but also in the Near East and North Africa. An example of this is the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews, which was founded in 1809. The London Society gave its full attention to Ethiopia (Abyssinia). Theodore II, a new Ethiopian sovereign, longed to modernize his country and invited engineers, craftsmen, and military advisers to work and share their knowledge – even if they came in the

---

<sup>1</sup> BRUCE 1790. His description received ample distribution and was at once translated into French, Dutch and German.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. SCHWARZ 2009.

“disguise” of missionaries.<sup>3</sup> Strict rules applied for them: they were not allowed to evangelize the Ethiopian-Orthodox Christians but rather had to concentrate their efforts on the non-Christian believers. “As a result of European intervention a new identity was imagined for the community [of the Falashas]” and as Parfitt pointed out, “their Jewishness became institutionalized [...] when [...] [bishop Samuel] Gobat urged the London Society for the Promoting of Christianity among the Jews to take over the missions of the Falasha.”<sup>4</sup>

The then released reports of the missionaries and the missionary societies about their efforts did not remain without consequences for the Jewish communities. Orthodox Jewry was particularly concerned and encouraged relief actions to rescue their “Jewish brethren.”<sup>5</sup> These actions were sometimes supported by the newly established self-help organizations, e.g. the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, but did not bring the desired results. Almost forty years later, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a young Polish student in Paris, Jacques Faitlovitch attempted to readdress the problem of the Falashas.<sup>6</sup> Faitlovitch was born in 1881 in Lodz and went to school in Berlin.<sup>7</sup> He enrolled at the *Sorbonne* and studied Oriental languages. There, the Orientalist Joseph Halévy served as one of his academic teachers. Halévy was a Semitist, who had visited Ethiopia and the Falashas in 1868 on behalf of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*. At that time, however, his statements were received with many objections, which hurt him deeply.<sup>8</sup> Faitlovitch earned his doctorate at the University of Lausanne in 1907 with an anthology of Ethiopian proverbs.<sup>9</sup> During the years 1916-1919 he taught Oriental languages at the University of Geneva. In the 1930s he settled in Palestine and died in 1955 in Tel Aviv.

---

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. STREBEL 2001.

<sup>4</sup> PARFITT 2005, 33-34.

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Azriel Hildesheimer (1820-1899), founder of the Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin, promoted many such relief efforts, cfr. ELIAV 1969, 30-33; 69.

<sup>6</sup> An alternative rendering of his name is Ya’akov Noah Faitlowitsch. Faitlovitch’s life and career are outlined in GRINFELD 1986 and in TREVISAN SEMI 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. MESSING 1982, 55.

<sup>8</sup> FAITLOVITCH 1910, 1-3, and notes.

<sup>9</sup> FAITLOVITCH 1907.

Faitlovitch made his first trip to Ethiopia at the age of 23 in 1904. From then on he devoted his entire life and all his professional efforts to the *Beta Israel*, the term the Falashas themselves preferred, mostly acting as a “counter-missionary” who became a “culture broker”.<sup>10</sup> However, without an adequate budget, the ambitious goals he strove to achieve could not be attained. The existing self-help organizations<sup>11</sup> - *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, Anglo-Jewish Association (founded 1871), Jewish Colonization Association or *Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden* founded 1901) - provided assistance but not without their own interests. Thus, all evidence pointed to the foundation of a separate organization, which was established in Florence in 1906-07. In spite of all the support of the small Italian community, the required budget was not sufficient and he therefore looked for support in other countries. It was especially in Germany, Faitlovitch once stated, that he found “outstanding lively interest”.<sup>12</sup> His second journey to Ethiopia in 1908 was assisted by the *Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden*. The description and the results of that expedition were published in German 1910 in his book *Quer durch Abessinien*.<sup>13</sup>

## The Background to the German Pro-Falasha Committee

The activities of a German branch of the Pro-Falasha Committee from before World War I were quite unknown, or even forgotten, until I published an article on the subject a couple of years ago.<sup>14</sup> By chance, I came across a membership-list of the International Pro-Falasha Committee, dated spring 1914, stocked in the files of the State Archive of Hamburg, concerning the Jewish communities of Hamburg, Altona, and Wandsbek.<sup>15</sup> The list was attached as a circular letter, asking

---

<sup>10</sup> MESSING 1982, 54.

<sup>11</sup> For a fresh look at these organizations, see BARCHEN 2003 and BARCHEN 2005.

<sup>12</sup> FAITLOVITCH 1910, 8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ivi*.

<sup>14</sup> JANKOWSKI 2007.

<sup>15</sup> StAHH, JG 840, 4-7.

German Jewry for assistance for the Falasha. In studying the letter and the list of members,<sup>16</sup> I not only wondered why in general such an association was established and in particular at that time, but, in addition, I was curious to learn more about the tendencies of that period and of perhaps the commonly held attitudes, opinions, and ideas of its enrolled members.<sup>17</sup>

The industrial revolution which promoted nationalistic ideas had a huge impact on the German Empire as of 1871. In 1890, the German foreign policy saw a radical reorientation toward *Weltpolitik*, with the aim of increasing Germany's influence in the world and gaining a status equalling the most successful nation states of the time, such as Great Britain and France. The German population allowed themselves to cooperate in this aim, although Germany's position among the great powers of Europe had endured numerous setbacks since 1890.<sup>18</sup> Around the globe promising fields of geopolitical activity were being sought. Actually, in the course of the general German exertion of gaining influence, the general interest regarding Ethiopia was constantly growing.<sup>19</sup> The German government for instance initiated a mission of German diplomats to Ethiopia in 1904-05,<sup>20</sup> encouraged entrepreneurs and engineers to work there, financed a scientific expedition,<sup>21</sup> and funded a lectureship in Amharic at the Berlin University.

Apart from this official side, the Jewish interest in Ethiopia,

---

<sup>16</sup> All the biographical notes are checked either in *JüdLex*, *EncJud*, *BHDE*, *BBKL* as well as in WALK 1988 and WININGER 1979, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>17</sup> However, I will not tackle the *Falashafrage* (the problem of the origins of the Falasha) here.

<sup>18</sup> The German foreign policy operations proved mostly luckless, as summarized by BARKIN et SHEEHAN 2009. They write: "The Japanese objected to Germany's involvement in China in the 1890's. In 1898, after the Reichstag passed the first Naval Bill, Anglo-German relations deteriorated. The Supplementary Naval Act of 1900 further strained relations with Britain, as did a proposed Berlin-Baghdad railroad through the Ottoman Empire, a project that threatened British as well as Russian interests in the Balkans. Two crises over Morocco, in 1905 and 1911, drove France and Britain closer together and made for a tense international atmosphere".

<sup>19</sup> Cfr. TAFLA 1981.

<sup>20</sup> ROSEN 1907.

<sup>21</sup> LITTMANN 1913.

regarding the fate of the Falasha, as already stated, had been growing since the nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> The abovementioned circular letter to the German-Jewish communities made it quite clear that the renewed activity at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was due to the deep influence and service of Jacques Faitlovitch.

Thus, together with a powerful and engaged German Jewish community, and combined with Faitlovitch’s reservation and opposition regarding the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, it seemed to be a logical consequence to move the base of the International Pro-Falasha Committee from Florence to Frankfurt-on-Main in the spring of 1914.

### Members of the Committee

In Frankfurt, on 8<sup>th</sup> March 1914, the most distinguished leaders of the Pro-Falasha Committee assembled to confer about the organization of their association and the next steps that should be taken.<sup>23</sup> Amongst the members, who attended in person, were participants from Germany, Italy, Austria, Hungary, and Switzerland. Non-attendant, but enlisted, were persons from France, Great Britain, Russia with Poland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Egypt, South Africa and the United States.<sup>24</sup> The vast majority of participants came from German-speaking countries and from Germany whose pre-World War I boundaries comprised parts of what is modern-day France, Poland, and Russia.

The membership-list in question shows a properly structured roster: an honorary president (Samuel Hirsch Margulies, 1858-1922), the Chief Rabbi of Florence as of 1890 and founder of the *Collegio Rabbिनico Italiano*, a president (Julius Goldschmidt),<sup>25</sup> four vice-

---

<sup>22</sup> Starting with an article in the journal *Sulamith* 6 (1) 1820, 58-61.

<sup>23</sup> AZJ 1914a, 140

<sup>24</sup> Italy and Austria-Hungary had six members each; Switzerland had four enrolled members; France, the Netherlands and Great Britain – three each; Russia-Poland – two; South Africa, Belgium, Denmark, Egypt and the USA had one member each.

<sup>25</sup> Julius Goldschmidt (1858-1932), art-dealer, philanthropist, important patron,

presidents,<sup>26</sup> a treasurer,<sup>27</sup> a secretary,<sup>28</sup> a deputy secretary,<sup>29</sup> sixteen on a *Beisitzer* (advisory board) and a central committee with sixty-one members without any detailed functions.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, this list - resembling a kind of “Who’s Who” of that time - discloses that 70% of the members possessed a degree and/or a graduate occupation: lawyers, physicists, natural scientists, professors, librarians, teachers, journalists, philanthropists, travellers, and art collectors. Several were engaged in banking, or in business, and many were of means and commanded a deep influence.<sup>31</sup> Also striking is the number of Rabbis, who had enrolled in the Pro-Falasha Committee.<sup>32</sup> Of the enlisted 86 members, there were 36 either with the title Rabbi

---

president of *Gesellschaft zur Erforschung jüdischer Kunstdenkmäler*, Frankfurt-am-Main.

<sup>26</sup> Dr. phil. Albert Sondheimer (1876-1942), industrialist, philanthropist, member of *Agudas Jisroel* (Frankfurt-am-Main); the regional court judge Ludwig Stern (Stuttgart); Moritz Stiel (Köln); and Dr. I. Ginsberg (Berlin).

<sup>27</sup> Salomon Epstein.

<sup>28</sup> Rechtsanwalt (lawyer) Dr. jur. Abraham (Aba) Horovitz (1880-1953), Frankfurt-am-Main; he was able to immigrate to Great Britain, and became the co-founder of the Association of Jewish Refugees.

<sup>29</sup> Professor Dr. Bondi.

<sup>30</sup> StAHH JG 840, 4-7.

<sup>31</sup> e.g. Edmond de Rothschild, Paris, well-known banker and philanthropist; Moritz Nathan Oppenheim, Frankfurt-am-Main, merchant (*Großkaufmann*) (1848-1933); Albert Sondheimer, Frankfurt-am-Main, industrialist; and already mentioned, Julius Goldschmidt, Frankfurt-am-Main, owner of the firm J & S Goldschmidt, which was the royal purveyor to the Tsar of Russia before WWI.

<sup>32</sup> Already the founding of the committee in Italy can be attributed to the efforts of several Rabbis. Some of these Rabbis were still enrolled in 1914, amongst them Samuel Hirsch Margulies (Florence), Guttmann and Rosenthal (Breslau), Simonsen (Copenhagen), Cohn (Basle). The participation from 1906 to 1914 was passed from brother to brother, e.g. in the case of Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, Hermann Adler to Elkan Adler, or from father to son, like in the case of Rabbi Marcus Horovitz to his oldest son, the Orthodox Dr. phil. Jakob Horovitz. Jakob Horovitz (1873-1939), RS, Univ. Marburg worked in Frankfurt-am-Main from 1902 onwards as a teacher and then as a Rabbi. Arrested even before the November pogroms of 1938, imprisoned and tortured, he left Germany as a broken man and died shortly afterwards in Holland; cfr. “Horovitz, Jakob” in <http://www.juedischesmuseum.de/judengasse/ehhtml/P140.htm> accessed 3 April 2008.

or with Rabbinical training.<sup>33</sup> Twenty one of them were living in what were then German countries.

More than half of the affiliated insiders - 53 German Jews to be exact - had put their names on the register. If not working as Rabbis, they occupied well-known positions in their hometowns, and often engaged in charity organizations or communal politics.<sup>34</sup> They came from a great variety of German towns and cities, from Cologne, Stuttgart, Munich, Beuthen, Dortmund, Duisburg, Emden, Halberstadt, Konstanz, Nürnberg, Straßburg und Kattowitz. But the most important clusters of supporters were located in three cities, namely Breslau, Berlin, and Frankfurt-on-Main.

Since the Middle Ages, Frankfurt sheltered one of the largest and most important Jewish communities in Germany. The community, which saw an Orthodox revival by Samson Raphael Hirsch in the midst of the nineteenth century, continued to grow and become wealthy in the following years. By the 1900's, Jews in Frankfurt were prosperous and influential, active in both business and politics, and often engaged in organizations like *Mizrachi* or *Agudas Jisroel*.<sup>35</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century, Breslau became the empire's sixth-largest city and a major industrial centre, notably of linen and cotton manufacture. Breslau was noted for its university, a venerable institution, which, comparatively early, held a chair for Oriental Studies. Besides, Breslau was especially famous for its *Jüdisch-Theologisches Seminar* (Jewish Theological Seminary or JTS), the first scientific institution for the training of Rabbis. Opened in 1854, it

---

<sup>33</sup> Some of the members, who had studied at a Rabbinical seminary, did not practise this profession (Aron Freimann, Isaak Markon) or did not mention it on the membership-list (e.g. Ludwig Blau, Marcus Brann, Ismar Elbogen, Theodor Kroner, David Simonsen).

<sup>34</sup> e.g. Salomon Wiener (1844-1930), *Stadtältester* in Kattowitz, communal politician, president of the Jewish community; Landgerichtsrat (Judge) Ludwig Stern (Stuttgart), member of the *Israelitische Landesversammlung*; Dr. Alfred Klee (1875-1943), Berlin, lawyer and active in numerous Jewish organizations; Dr. Abraham Hirsch (1867-1920), Halberstadt, industrialist, representative of the Jewish community.

<sup>35</sup> Today, the same *Agudas Jisroel*, pronounced *Agudat Yisroel*, is an ultra-Orthodox religious political party in Israel.

soon became a centre of Jewish scholarship and spiritual activity and served as a model for similar institutions, which followed suite.

Last but not least, the “boomtown” Berlin, the capital of Prussia and since 1871 the capital of the German empire, had become the centre of the *Haskalah* (Hebrew: Enlightenment movement) at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. By the turn of the nineteenth century, more than 5% of the total population was Jewish. Communal institutions also thrived. Not only did Berlin house *Die Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*, a school for the scientific study of Judaism, as well as a liberal Rabbinical seminary, but also the Rabbinical Seminary for Orthodox Judaism, founded only one year later in 1873 by Rabbi Azriel Hildesheimer (1820-1899). They were equally attracted to the University of Berlin and another important institution, the Seminary of Oriental Languages, founded in 1887. It is no coincidence that most of the German participants originated from these three cities.

At those times, communal, social and political German-Jewish life centred on a multitude of local, regional, or countrywide associations, societies, and clubs.<sup>36</sup> In all the towns and cities, multiple memberships of participants were common. In addition, it is important to note that nearly half of the German members of the Pro-Falasha Committee had graduated from one of the abovementioned Rabbinical seminaries, either in Breslau or in Berlin. Some of them had even been personally recruited by Rabbi known Azriel Hildesheimer.<sup>37</sup>

In addition, the German seminaries had drawn students from outside Germany as well. In Breslau, Margulies came from Poland and Simonsen from Denmark, while in Berlin Markon came from Russia. Remarkably, the Rabbinical seminary students often combined

---

<sup>36</sup> e.g. *Centralverein für deutsche Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens*, *Zionistische Vereinigung für Deutschland*, *Verein für jüdische Geschichte und Literatur*, *Verband der deutschen Juden*, *Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wissenschaft des Judentums*, *Jüdisch-literarische Gesellschaft*, *Bnai Brith*, *Mizrachi*, *Agudas Jisroel* – and of course, the various welfare institutions and organizations. With the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century not solely religious or philanthropic interests, but also ethnic origin contributed more or less to a new sociability.

<sup>37</sup> That applied for Rabbi Dr. Armand Bloch (1865-1952), of the Alsace region, who studied at RS Berlin and University of Leipzig, and for Jakob Horovitz, Nehemias Anton Nobel, Aron Freimann.



their religious training with enrolment at a secular university. By the mid-nineteenth century, Oriental studies was an established academic discipline.<sup>38</sup> At least 15 members of the Pro-Falashas Committee had chosen Oriental studies, namely the study of Near, Middle, and Far Eastern societies, cultures, and languages, as their major field of academic interest. Among these can be counted: Zvi Margulies, Zvi Hirsch Chajes, Joseph H. Hertz, David Simonsen, Emil Schlesinger, Samuel Poznanski, Isaak Markon, Ludwig Blau and Armand Bloch.

Certainly, a highlight in the Pro-Falasha Committee was the engagement of Eugen Mittwoch (1876-1942). Of Orthodox Jewish denomination and a German patriot, Mittwoch was active in many other self-help organizations and had visited Palestine several times. He organized the school system of the *Hilfsverein* and worked during World War I for the Intelligence Service of the German Foreign Office. After having been given Emeritus status in 1935, he was able to leave Germany for Great Britain – by personal intervention of Benito Mussolini<sup>39</sup> - due to his knowledge of Ethiopia. Mittwoch, who held a chair of Semitic studies at the *Seminar für Orientalische Sprachen* in Berlin, was the leading scholar for Ethiopian issues at that time. From 1905 to 1907, he, together with Aleqa Taye Gebre Maryam (1861-1924),<sup>40</sup> offered language courses in Amharic – for the first time at a German University.

Comparable to Mittwoch in international scholarly reputation was another member of the Pro-Falasha Committee, the chief historian of the Weimar Republic and theologian Ismar Elbogen (1874-1943).<sup>41</sup> He

---

<sup>38</sup> In Germany, Oriental studies had the connotation of a cosmopolitan science with an international orientation, although this university training did not have the advantage of leading to a specified occupation; cfr. MANGOLD 2004.

<sup>39</sup> Cfr. [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eugen\\_Mittwoch](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eugen_Mittwoch) accessed 20 March 2008.

<sup>40</sup> Cfr. <http://www.goethe.de/ins/et/prj/pio/efh/das/deindex.htm> accessed 20 March 2008; cfr. “Äthiopische Studien in Deutschland” accessed 10 January 2009.

<sup>41</sup> Born in Schildberg, Poznan Province, Elbogen was a major contributor to the studies of Jewish history, literature and biblical exegesis. Reflecting the change in the focus of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, Elbogen encouraged the study of such new sub-fields as Jewish art, music, and sociology, cfr. “Ismar Elbogen” in <http://www.gwu.edu/gelman/spec/kiel/treasures/elbogen.html> accessed 10 January 2008, and BARON 1943.

graduated from the JTS in Breslau, taking courses in Oriental studies at the University as well as teaching in Florence at the *Collegio Rabbinico*, under the directorship of Margulies, and later on at the *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*. He was internationally honoured for his analysis of the Jewish liturgy.

Another prominent figure listed as a member of the Pro-Falasha Committee was Nehemias Anton Nobel (1871-1922),<sup>42</sup> pupil and friend of the philosopher Hermann Cohen, connoisseur of Goethe's life and work, co-founder of the *Mizrachi* organization in 1904-05, and Talmud teacher of Franz Rosenzweig (1899-1938). Nobel filled a position as an Orthodox Rabbi in Frankfurt-on-Main from 1910 until his death, after having held this position in Hamburg. He had studied philosophy and literature in Bonn and Berlin, in combination with his training at the Rabbinical seminary there.

Also noteworthy of mention is Aron Freimann<sup>43</sup> (1871-1948), an Orthodox Jew, a recognized librarian, bibliographer, historian, and graduate of Oriental studies in Erlangen and Berlin. For more than 30 years he directed the Judaica section of the Frankfurt City and University library and managed to escape to the USA before the Holocaust.

Equally important to put on record are the German Rabbis of liberal denomination, who took an interest in the Pro-Falasha-movement, although on other issues they were bitterly contested by the Orthodox Jews. Examples include Arnold Lazarus (1877-1932),<sup>44</sup> Manass

---

<sup>42</sup> Nobel was born in Hungary and grew up in Halberstadt. See HERUBERGER 2005; HERUBERGER 2007.

<sup>43</sup> Born in Filehne, Poznan, Freimann was among the leading figures in German Jewish modern Orthodoxy - his lifelong passion being Jewish bibliography. See HEUBERGER 2004.

<sup>44</sup> Lazarus, born in 1877 in Breslau, where his father was principal of the JTS, was Rabbi to the Jewish community in Frankfurt-am-Main from 1904 to 1932, and belonged to the Jewish Reform Movement. He was a much loved spiritual comforter, respected as a spokesman for the community, belonged to many Frankfurt associations and lodges, and fought energetically against antisemitism; cfr. "Lazarus Arnold" in <http://www.juedischesmuseum.de/judengasse/ehhtml/P146.htm> accessed 1 April 2008.

Neumark (1875-1942)<sup>45</sup> and Hermann Vogelstein (1870-1942).<sup>46</sup> Lazarus and Vogelstein were trained at the JTS in Breslau, Neumark at the Berlin seminary, but they all had graduated in Oriental studies.

### **Motivations for Participating**

Regarding motives for taking an interest in the situation of the Falashas or the *Beta Israel*, we should not underestimate the influence of another phenomenon, the so called “Jewish Renaissance”. The expression was coined by Martin Buber in a speech at the Fifth Zionist congress in Basle in 1901. Emancipation, seemingly achieved and embedded in German culture, gave way to an identity crisis among sections of German Jewry. A number of writers and artists involved in the Berlin Secession and the expressionist circles, who looked for an appropriate artistic language to express a modern Jewish identity, influenced other German Jews. In the course of cultural Zionism, amidst the waves of Jewish nationalism, they came to reject the reigning ethos of assimilation, aspiring to determine or to re-invent Jewish literature, art, culture, tradition and religion, and weaving into their modern identities materials from various Jewish sources – such as *Hasidism*, *Kabbalah*, *Midrash* and medieval Hebrew poetry, by often mystifying, romanticizing, and reshaping the sources to acquire anew the Bible and the Hebrew language.<sup>47</sup> Drawn into that reinterpretation of a Jewish past, the Falasha might have aroused particular interest on the part of German academics, as a link to ancient times and/or as a discovery of unique Jewish roots.

---

<sup>45</sup> Born in Posen, served since 1905 (until his death in Theresienstadt) as Rabbi in Duisburg; he was active in youth and social work, and promoted immigration to Palestine.

<sup>46</sup> Rabbi and historian, born in Pilsen, son of a leading figure of liberal Judaism in Germany, since 1897 employed in Königsberg.

<sup>47</sup> Cfr. BERTZ 1991; MENDES-FLOHR 1997, 333-355; KREMER 2007; BUBER 2001.

## The First Meeting and its Aftermath

Concerning the gathering on 8<sup>th</sup> March 1914 in Frankfurt, we read in German-Jewish newspapers: “From everywhere distinguished leaders of the communities and Rabbis of the different denominations placed themselves enthusiastically into service for the Pro-Falasha idea”.<sup>48</sup> The conference was opened with an introductory speech by Faitlovitch about Ethiopia, about his travels and experiences, about his aims and proposals; this was followed by discussions. Participating in the debate on-site were Zvi Hirsch Chajes from Trieste,<sup>49</sup> Apfel,<sup>50</sup> Stiel and Simon from Cologne, Stern from Stuttgart, Bollag-Feuchtwanger from Basle, and Albert Sondheimer, A. Lazarus, Jakob Aryeh Feuchtwanger,<sup>51</sup> N.A. Nobel, and A. Horovitz, all from Frankfurt. Written statements were presented, submitted by Mittwoch and Elbogen, both from Berlin.<sup>52</sup> Debated at the meeting were the topics of the means of financing the project, e.g. the funds for the Jewish education of the Falasha youth, the construction of a teachers’ training college in Eritrea, translating the Bible and other religious texts into the vernacular language(s), and the so called regeneration of the Falasha’s Judaism. The planned budget comprised of 30.000-35.000 Marks and a building fund of approximately 50.000 Francs was set up.<sup>53</sup> The position of a secretary-general was also envisaged. The circular letter, attached to the membership list, gave a full account of all these goals.<sup>54</sup>

Without having a notion of what was going to happen a few months later, namely the outbreak of World War I, the newspaper articles

---

<sup>48</sup> AZJ 1914b, 3.

<sup>49</sup> Zvi Hirsch Chajes (1805-1855) was one of the foremost Galician Talmudic scholars of the day. He also corresponded with Dr. Jacques Faitlovitch in Yiddish (communication from Sigrid Sohn to Shalva Weil 2009).

<sup>50</sup> Simon Apfel (1852-1932), physicist, president of the provincial council (*Vorsitzender des Provinzialverbandes*) together with his son Justizrat Dr. jur Alfred Apfel (1880-1940), lawyer, Zionist and functionary of many associations.

<sup>51</sup> Dr. Jakob Aryeh Feuchtwanger (1873-1955), physicist, Zionist, immigrated in 1936 to Palestine.

<sup>52</sup> AZJ 1914a, 141.

<sup>53</sup> AZJ 1914a, 141.

<sup>54</sup> StAHH JG 840, 1-4.

depicted a resolute Faitlovitch, who tried to provide reasonable grounds for the newly formed International Committee. And certainly he wanted to prove untrue the fear of Margulies, who had warned that the work which had been initiated, might not be finished.<sup>55</sup>

Although in the spring of 1914, Hamburg, one of the major and large German-Jewish communities, was unwilling to cooperate with the Pro-Falasha movement, the scene had changed by the summer. By July 1914, committee branches existed in Hamburg, Altona, Posen, München, Eschwege, next to Frankfurt-on-Main, Breslau, Kattowitz, Beuthen, Köln, Stuttgart and Berlin. Even more, the constitution of new branches was planned for Hannover, Thorn, Kassel, Mainz, Darmstadt and Chemnitz.<sup>56</sup>

The outbreak of World War I turned out to be a severe halt in relation to the fate of the International Pro-Falasha Committee, at least in Germany, and its German development. The military defeat of the German empire resulted in the loss of the German colonies, and in the loss of interest in overseas matters and countries. The patriotic zeal of most of the German Jews and Rabbis, to concern themselves in German interior and foreign affairs, suffered a great deal from the anti-Semitic *Judenählung* of 1916, a census of Jews participating in German military service during the First World War, which was experienced as a heavy insult. Economic misery, disruption in political matters, and the overall German uncertainty after the Treaty of Versailles left its mark both on German society and on German Jewry. Post-war Germany was no longer a suitable place for the Pro-Falasha Committee.<sup>57</sup> Consequently, during the 1920s the base was

---

<sup>55</sup> AZJ 1914a, 141.

<sup>56</sup> Cfr. ISR 4. The efforts to alter the fate of the *Beta Israel* did not always evoke equal devotion in German-Jewish communities. Opposed opinions were published in two newspaper articles: *Hamburger Familienblatt* 22 June 1914, 3, and *Israelitisches Familienblatt* 25 June 1914, 10.

<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, the education of some Ethiopian pupils still took place in Germany during the 1920's. A prominent student was Hailu (Elazar) Desta, who studied in Frankfurt-am-Main and then moved to Berlin, WEIL 1998. In the meantime, fictional works were published on the Falasha students, cfr. SCHACHNOWITZ 1923, recalled by SOHN 2005, based on the life of the Falasha pupil Solomon Isaac documented in WEIL 1999.

moved to the USA. However, the achievements and accomplishments of the German “Jewish Renaissance” developed further during the Weimar Republic and remained unmatched.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

Taking part in the Pro-Falasha Committee was often based on relationships, stemming out from religious denominations, fields and places of study (Rabbinical training in Breslau or Berlin), social contacts and scholarly cooperation (editing journals, historical monographs, festschriften, prayerbooks), attendance in various societies and clubs (*Gesellschaft für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*, *Verein für jüdische Geschichte und Literatur*) and meetings in communal organizations. With regard to their academic education and their professional positions, the members represented rather a homogenous group of *Bildungsbürgertum* (educated citizenry). Mutual friendships, cultural imprints, academic conditioning through university teachers, and often a similar background, which was partly characterized by their origins from the Eastern parts of Germany or Austria, created the appropriate network in an upwardly mobile middle class setting. Being a graduate of the same educational institution played a vital role. Belonging to an Orthodox affiliation with a Zionist attitude, having been trained as Rabbi and having studied Oriental Studies were some other important, motivating benchmarks in joining the Pro-Falasha Committee.

Taking part in the Pro-Falasha movement before World War I was therefore an “obligation of honour”, the so called *Ehrenpflicht aller Juden* - as the circular letter had pointed out;<sup>59</sup> but it was an entirely European-Jewish issue. The text of the circular letter, the mentioned aims and goals displaced a European-centred view of things to be done. We may argue that for the educated, sometimes estranged Europeans, in the spirit of that age, in the tendencies of that period, in the context of the “Jewish Renaissance”, and in the course of the self-assertion

---

<sup>58</sup> A detailed presentation of this period is given by BRENNER 1996.

<sup>59</sup> StAHH JG 840, 3

against the non-Jewish majority and Christian missionary efforts, the Falasha may have been rated as a nostalgic symbol of a vanished period of time. This symbol represented an imagined pre-Talmudic, pre-Rabbinic Judaism, which had to be protected, and likewise patronized by transforming it through a counter-mission in fitting with European standards. In contrast to North African Jewry or the Jewry of the Near East, only the Falashas or the *Beta Israel* were targeted to be re-Judaized. Ethiopian culture, history and society played little, if any, role in this context.

### List of Abbreviations

AZJ 1914a	Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums. 78.12 (1914): 140-142.
AZJ 1914b	Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums.78.32 (1914), Gemeindebote: 3.
BBKL	Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon - Herzberg: Traugott Bautz, 1992- <a href="http://bautz.de/bbkl/">http://bautz.de/bbkl/</a> .
BHDE	Biographisches Handbuch der deutschsprachigen Emigration nach 1933.3 vols. München: Saur, 1980-1983.
EncJud	Encyclopaedia Judaica. 16 vols. Jerusalem: Keter Publ. House, 1971.
HWJ	Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums Berlin.
ISR	Der Israelit. 55 20 July 1914, no 3:4.
JTS J	üdisch-Theologisches Seminar Breslau.
JüdLex	Jüdisches Lexikon. 5 vols. Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1927-1930.
RS	Rabbinerseminar (Rabbinical seminary) Berlin.
StAHH	Staatsarchiv Hamburg, JG Jüdische Gemeinden.

### Bibliography

- BARCHEN E., “Two communities with a sense of mission”, in BRENNER M. et. al. (eds.), *Jewish Emancipation Reconsidered. The French and the German Models* (Schriftenreihe wissenschaftlicher Abhandlungen des Leo Baeck Instituts 66), Tübingen, Mohr, 2003, 111-128.

- BARCHEN E., *Weder Asiaten noch Orientalen: Internationale jüdische Organisationen und die Europäisierung "rückständiger" Juden* (Ex oriente lux 7), Würzburg, Ergon-Verlag, 2005.
- BARKIN K.J. et SHEEHAN J., "Germania", in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/231186/Germany> accessed 4 March 2009.
- BARON S.W., "Ismar Elbogen", *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, 13, 1943, 24-26.
- BERTZ I., "Eine neue Kunst für ein altes Volk. Die Jüdische Renaissance in Berlin", *Ausstellungsmagazin Jüdisches Museum (Berlin Museum)* 28, 1991.
- BRUCE J., *Travels to the Source of the Nile*, 2, Edinburgh, 1790.
- BRENNER M., *The Renaissance of Jewish culture in Weimar Germany*, New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press, 1996.
- BUBER M., *Frühe kulturkritische und philosophische Schriften 1891-1924*, Werkausgabe 1, Gütersloh, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2001
- ELIAV M. (ed.), *Rabbiner Azriel Hildesheimer Briefe*, Jerusalem, Mass., 1965.
- FAITLOVITCH J., *Proverbes abyssins*, Paris, Geuthner, 1907.
- FAITLOVITCH J., *Quer durch Abessinien: Meine zweite Reise zu den Falaschas*, Berlin, Poppelauer, 1910.
- GRINFELD I., "Jacques Faitlovitch: 'Father' of the Falaschas", in AVNER Y. et AL. (eds.), *The Jews of Ethiopia: A community in Transition*, Tel Aviv, Bet Hatefutzot, 1986, 30-35.
- HEUBERGER R., "Aron Freimann und die Wissenschaft des Judentums", *Conditio judaica*, 51, Tübingen, Niemeyer, 2004.
- HEUBERGER R., *Rabbiner Nehemias Anton Nobel. Die jüdische Renaissance in Frankfurt am Main*, Frankfurt-am-Main, Societäts-Verlag, 2005.
- HEUBERGER R., *Rabbi Nehemiah Anton Nobel. The Jewish Renaissance in Frankfurt am Main*, Frankfurt-am-Main, Societäts-Verlag, 2007.
- JANKOWSKI A., "Für die Falaschas", *Aethiopica*, 10, 2007, 144-176.
- KREMER A., "Diese Tragik in ihrer ganzen Tragweite. Martin Bubers Konzept eines kulturellen Nationalismus", in KREMER A., *Deutsche Juden – deutsche Sprache. Jüdische und judenfeindliche Konzepte und konflikte* (Studia linguistica germanica 87), Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 2007, 383-401.
- LITTMANN E., *Deutsche Aksum-Expedition*, 4 vols., Berlin, Reimer, 1913.
- MANGOLDS., *Eine "weltbürgerliche Wissenschaft": die deutsche Orientalistik im 19 Jahrhundert* (Pallas-Athene 11), Stuttgart, Steiner, 2004.



- MENDES-FLOHR P., “Neue Richtungen im jüdischen Denken”, *Umstrittene Integration 1871-1918* (Deutsch-jüdische Geschichte in der Neuzeit 3), München, Beck, 1997.
- MESSING S.D., *The story of the Falaschas. “Black Jews“of Ethiopia*, Hamden, Conn., Author, 1982.
- PARFITT T. and TREVISAN SEMI E. (eds), *Jews of Ethiopia. The birth of an elite*, London, Routledge, 2005.
- ROSEN F., *Eine deutsche Gesandtschaft in Abessinien*, Leipzig, Veit, 1907.
- SCHACHNOWITZ S., *Salomo der Falascha. Eine Geschichte aus der Gegenwart*, Frankfurt, Kauffmann, 1923.
- SCHWARZ J.V., “The Origins and the Development of German-Jewish Press in Germany till 1850. Reflections on the Transformation of the German-Jewish Public Sphere in Bourgeois Society”, in *Proceedings of the 66th IFLA Council and General Conference Jerusalem, Israel, 13-18 August 2000*, <http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla66/papers/106-144e.htm> accessed 31 January 2009.
- SOHN S., “S. Schachnowitz’s novel Salomo der Falascha”, in PARFITT T. and TREVISAN SEMI E. (eds.), *Jews of Ethiopia. The birth of an elite*, London, Routledge, 2005, 53-64.
- STREBEL, B. “Leben auf dem Missionsfeld”, *Aethiopica*, 4, 2001, 121-157.
- TAFLA B., *Ethiopia and Germany* (Äthiopistische Forschungen 5), 1981.
- TREVISAN SEMI E., *Jacques Failovitch and the Jews of Ethiopia*, London, Vallentine Mitchell, 2007.
- WALK J., *Kurzbiographien zur Geschichte der Juden, 1918-1945*, München, K.G. Saur, 1988.
- WEIL S., “Hailu Desta: A Little-Known German Student”, Unpublished paper presented to the SOSTEJE conference, Milan, Italy, 1998.
- WEIL S., “The Life and Death of Solomon Isaac”, in PARFITT T. and TREVISAN SEMI E. (eds.), *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel: Studies on the Ethiopian Jews*, Richmond, Curzon, 1999, 40-49.
- WININGER S., *Große jüdische Nationalbiographie*, 7 vols., Nendeln, Kraus Reprint, 1979.



TAAMERAT EMMANUEL AND GIUSEPPE LEVI.  
A FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN AN ETHIOPIAN JEWISH *MASKIL*  
AND A FLORENTINE JEWISH RABBI

*Rav Dr. Joseph (Giuseppe) Levi, Chief Rabbi,  
Florence Jewish Community, Italy*

### **Taamerat Emmanuel and the Pro-Falasha Committees**

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Rabbi Shmuel Tzvi Hirsch Margalio, or Margulies (as he was called according to the Ashkenazi pronunciation even by the members of his Sephardic congregation), the chief Rabbi of Florence at the time, transferred the Italian Rabbinical Seminary (*Beit Midrash le-Rabbanim ha-Italki – Collegio Rabbinico Italiano*) from Rome to Florence.<sup>1</sup>

The Seminary was a modern rabbinical college, open to philological and historical disciplines of knowledge, and at the same time traditional and close to Orthodox Judaism. In line with the European as well as the Jewish culture and knowledge of the time, Rabbi Margulies brought to Florence students from all over Europe, mainly local Florentine<sup>2</sup> and Eastern European students. Rabbi Margulies, as a director of an Italian institute, shared the colonial adventure and the particular sentiment felt by the Italians towards the eastern part of Africa, including Eritrea and Ethiopia. He thus became president of the Pro-Falasha committee and opened the doors of the seminary to Ethiopian Jews.<sup>3</sup> Thus, between 1907 and 1919 a close friendship developed between two students of Rabbi Margulies' Seminary in Florence:<sup>4</sup> Taamerat Emmanuel, one of

---

<sup>1</sup> COLLEGIO RABBINICO ITALIANO (CRI) 1898.

<sup>2</sup> CRI 1901; CRI 1923.

<sup>3</sup> MARGULIES 1909; TREVISAN SEMI 2000.

<sup>4</sup> On the rabbinical school of Florence see next paragraph.

the few Ethiopian Jews who were accepted as students at the school<sup>5</sup> and the Florentine native student Giuseppe Levi, descendant of one of the local Jewish families, the Della Pergola family.<sup>6</sup> The friendship between the two men flourished during the first two decades of the twentieth century, while they were both students of the local Florentine Rabbinical School, and was maintained for another sixty years. At first, between Taamerat and Rabbi G. Levi himself, until his premature death in 1923,<sup>7</sup> and later, in a second period, with Rabbi Levi's spouse Sarah Bolafio Levi and their descendants, in Italy and Israel, until Taamerat's death in 1962. The story of this friendship testifies to the decisive cultural influence the years in Florence had on Taamerat's cultural and leadership concepts, and the important role Margulies and his Rabbinical School had in forming Ethiopian leadership as well as raising consciousness among European Jewish leadership to the Ethiopian Jewish drama.

Moreover, the details regarding the personal relations held by Taamerat Emmanuel with Rabbi G. Levi's family, before World War I and after World War II, exemplify some of the personal and political dilemmas a prominent Jewish Ethiopian Jew had to face during the twentieth century.

Taamerat Emmanuel, a leading figure in the modern history of the Ethiopian Jews<sup>8</sup> known as Falasha, made his first steps in Jewish education and leadership in France and then in Florence, where he was advised to go by his master, the famous Faitlovitch.<sup>9</sup> The reasons for his transfer from Paris to Florence had to do only partially with Taamerat's experience as a student in Paris. Rather it was mainly a result of the political shift of Faitlovitch himself, from supporting and

<sup>5</sup> GRINFELD 1985; TREVISAN SEMI 1987, 41-59; TREVISAN SEMI 2000, 1-53.

<sup>6</sup> VITERBO 2004, 53-56.

<sup>7</sup> See Jewish-Italian journals of the period: *Israel*, 6 Settembre 1923, "Dalle città d'Italia: da Trieste"; *Israel*, 17 Settembre 1923, "Il Prof. Giuseppe Levi"; *Israel*, 4 Ottobre 1923.

<sup>8</sup> QUIRIN 1992; KAPLAN 1992; KAPLAN 1998; MESSING 1982, 64-68; TREVISAN SEMI 1987, 144, note 19; SUMMERFIELD 2003; KAPLAN and BEN-DOR 1988.

<sup>9</sup> GRINFELD 1986; FAITLOVITCH 1905; FAITLOVITCH 1910.

being supported by the Franco-German oriented Falasha committee of *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, towards the positions of the Italian Pro-Falasha committee.<sup>10</sup>

The Pro-Falasha committee was created in Florence exactly a hundred years ago, in 1907.<sup>11</sup> Among its aims was to promote the cause of the Ethiopian Jews amongst European leadership and support Faitlovitch's aspiration of creating Jewish schools in Ethiopia. Faitlovitch's aim was to help native Falasha Jews, who had preserved the memory of their Jewish origin, confront the strong movement of evangelization among Ethiopian Jews. Evangelization in Ethiopia started by Jesuits in the seventeenth century and resumed with intense efforts by the Protestant Church in mid-nineteenth until early twentieth century and continues until today.<sup>12</sup> The Pro-Falasha Italian committee was headed and strongly supported by the chief Rabbi of the Jewish community of Florence and the director of its rabbinical seminar, Rabbi Shmuel Tzvi Margaliot-Margulies.<sup>13</sup>

Scholarship has already shown how the formation of the two different committees in favour of the Falasha reflect both French and Italian imperial interests, inspired respectively by Franco-German and Italian geo-political aspirations. At the same time the two committees reflected diverse cultural and anthropological concepts of the past and mainly of the future of Ethiopian Jews. On the one hand the position of the German-French committee was roughly that the traditions of the Ethiopian Jews should merge into classical rabbinic medieval and post medieval traditions, converting, so to say, the traditions of the Falasha to conform with medieval and post medieval tradition and norms of rabbinic orthodox Judaism. On the other hand, the Italian Pro-Falasha committee claimed that the material and educational efforts and aid should aim at creating a new durable contact between the Ethiopian *edah* tribe in Ethiopia and the rest of the Jewish world. According

---

<sup>10</sup> HALEVY 1868; FAITLOVITCH 1905; FAITLOVITCH 1909, FINZI et Al. 1908; TREVISAN SEMI 1987, 41-47.

<sup>11</sup> *Il vessillo israelitico*, 55, 1907, 89: "A Pro Falasha Movement".

<sup>12</sup> GIDNEY 1908; KAPLAN 1985; KAPLAN 1987; KAPLAN 1993; KAPLAN 1998; ULLENDORF and BAKINGHAM 1982.

<sup>13</sup> NEPPI MODONA 1962; NEPPI MODONA 1972; MARGULIES 1905.

to this view, efforts should be concentrated in the Falasha's own villages and traditional territories. It should aim at providing modern education on Jewish topics and other fields of modern intellectual and technical knowledge, allowing the Falasha to improve their own living conditions as well as occupational and professional realms.<sup>14</sup> The positions of the two different committees regarding the unique anthropological and religious singularity of Ethiopian Jews reflect, and at the same time contributed, to the debate within the Jewish world on the relations between medieval, or even pre-medieval, and modern Jewish forms of life. A problem which was pertinent to the philanthropic activities of French and German Jewish leadership and philanthropist among middle eastern and north African communities. It became even more accentuated in the context of the Ethiopian Jews and tribes.<sup>15</sup> This debate, to a certain extent, is still relevant and present in the dispute over the absorption of *Beta Israel* in Israel until our very days.<sup>16</sup> Among the ordinary members of the Pro-Falascia committee, there were rabbis and lay leaders from Germany and Italy including, as mentioned, Margulies, as well as Finzi, Chajes and Olschki from Florence, Castiglioni, Sereni, Tabet and Altari from Milano, Ottolenghi from Acqui and Da Fano from Rome<sup>17</sup> and various rabbis from Germany. Among the members of the committee we also find the contemporary chief rabbi of Torino, Rabbi Giacomo Bolafio, with whose daughter Taamerat will maintain a long standing friendship, first in Casale Monferrato and later on after Sarah Bolafio-Levi husband's death in Tel Aviv.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> LUZZATTO 1851-1854; HALEVY 1868; FAITLOVITCH 1907(b); MARGULIES 1909; ELIAV 1965; NAHOUM 1908; TREVISAN SEMI 2000, 24-25; WALDMAN 1984.

<sup>15</sup> ELIAV 1965; FINZI et Al. 1908; MARGULIES 1909; TREVISAN SEMI 1987, 47-49; *Ibid.*, 145 note 34; TREVISAN SEMI 1998; TREVISAN SEMI 2000, 4-5.

<sup>16</sup> On Israel's Rabbinat point of view see: CORINALDI 1988, 110-120, appendices IV,V,VII; KAPLAN 1988; SALAMON 1995.

<sup>17</sup> TREVISAN SEMI 1987, 145, note 27; *Il vessillo israelitico*, 55, 1907, 89: "A Pro Falasha Movement".

<sup>18</sup> See next paragraph.

## The Rabbinical School (*Collegio Rabbinico*) in Florence

Taamerat became a student of the Florentine Rabbinical School in 1907,<sup>19</sup> and according to the publications of the *Collegio Rabbinico* he completed his studies towards a *maskil*<sup>20</sup> title in 1915, together with other local Florentine and Jewish students from other European Jewish communities.<sup>21</sup>

The number of students of Florence's Rabbinical School was not very high and did not exceed 5-10 students per year.<sup>22</sup>

Considering Taamerat's young age as well as that of the other students, there is no wonder that longstanding strong ties were created between several of the students.

The study curriculum of the *Collegio Rabbinico* was a typical renewed modern-orthodox program. It aimed at "a profound knowledge of the history, literature and theology (of the Jews), uniting it with the adequate knowledge of modern scholarship, aiming at providing genuine rabbinic studies based on the methods and results of modern science".<sup>23</sup>

The first three years of studies included the following topics: Hebrew grammar, composition and rhetoric, Biblical studies and traditional commentaries, rabbinical exegesis, *Mishna* with Bartinoro commentary, *Halakhic* studies according to the *Shulhan Arukh* and Jewish history. In addition to the formal studies at the Rabbinical School the student had to attend formal courses at the local university aiming at a degree in humanities (with either philosophy or theology as major).

The second level of studies required the following seminars: Critical introduction to the *Mishna*, history of Jewish literature, sources of

<sup>19</sup> On Taamerat as a student at the Florence *Beit Midrash* see CRI 1923, 9 (*lauree e diplomi, anno scolastico 1914-1915*). TREVISAN SEMI 2000 is reporting that Taamerat acquired also the *shohet* title.

<sup>20</sup> *Maskil* was a first level rabbinical degree at the *Collegio Rabbinico* to be followed by the titles: *haver* and *hakham ha-shalem*.

<sup>21</sup> For the *Beit Midrash* students' list and the positions they occupied, see the students lists in CRI 1901; CRI 1923, 9; LEVI (forthcoming).

<sup>22</sup> CRI 1898; CRI 1901; CRI 1923.

<sup>23</sup> CRI 1898; CRI 1923; LEVI (forthcoming).

Jewish history, pedagogy, religious philosophy, rhetoric, geography, the Jewish year cycle and finally either Arabic language and grammar or Archeology.<sup>24</sup>

Besides preparing the student for practical rabbinic work the program offered a large academic background on Jewish topics in a spirit not dissimilar from the critical historical view of the *Hokhmat Israel/Wissenschaft des Judentums* of the time, yet from an orthodox traditional perspective. Unlike other Jewish European centres, since the Renaissance period,<sup>25</sup> the study of *Torah* in Italy was combined in a natural and integrated way with the study of the Arts and Sciences. Thus, Margulies' project of renewing rabbinic and Jewish studies, along with the spirit of modern philological and critical historical method, found a fertile ground in Florence and Italy. The tradition he brought and developed in Florence of combining religious orthodox rabbinic studies with modern philology and critical historical method survived his lifetime and was continued by a number of his students in Italy and abroad, before and after his death,<sup>26</sup> in particular by his brilliant and devoted student Umberto Moshe David Cassuto, the director of the *Collegio Rabbinico* after Margulies death in 1922, and a prominent biblical scholar.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> DISEGNI 1999.

<sup>25</sup> In spite of the wide interest and the large bibliography on the history of Italian Judaism, no specific work has yet been published on Italian Judaism and modernity, an argument dear to the historians of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* like Graetz and Geiger.

<sup>26</sup> LEVI (forthcoming); CRI 1923, 6.

<sup>27</sup> See Cassuto Umberto (Moshe David) in *EJ*, vol.5, 234-236. For a full bibliography of the writings of Cassuto see CASSUTO 1988; CASSUTO 2005. Cassuto was first a student of the *Beit Midrash*, then the secretary, and finally the director of the *Beit Midrash*. He had to give up his position after his nomination as a Hebrew Language and Literature Professor at Florence's University in 1925. He reassumed his position as a director of the *Beit Midrash* after being nominated on 1933 a Professor at Rome University. He then transferred under the Fascist regime the *Beit Midrash* and its rich library back to the capital Rome. Being obliged to resign from his University position due to the anti-Jewish laws of Fascist Italian Government from September 1938, he left Italy and was nominated a Professor of biblical studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem on 1939. See LEVI (forthcoming).



We can thus assume that while preparing himself for the *maskil* title, getting versed in the compulsory subjects requested for the *maskil* as well as in biblical, medieval and modern Hebrew at the *Collegio Rabbinico*, Taamerat Emmanuel also acquired a profound knowledge and emotional involvement with Italian-European culture at the University of Florence.<sup>28</sup>

There is no doubt that the years Taamerat spent in Florence, taking into consideration his young age at the time (from the age fifteen to twenty-four approx.) and the uniqueness of the program of the Rabbinical School he followed, were to become his most formative years. This phenomenon is well reflected in his correspondence with his *maestro* Faitlovitch.<sup>29</sup>

Among the figures Taamerat was in contact with during his years in Florence were prominent figures of Italian and German Judaism of the time such as: Margulies himself, Peretz Chayes, Sonne, Umberto Cassuto, all of whom became important leading Jewish scholars, as well as fellow students who later became rabbis in different Italian and Mediterranean communities such as Rudolfo Levi, Gustavo Calò, Rodolfo Campagnano, the future Chief Rabbi of Alessandria in Piemonte, Della Pergola, the future Chief Rabbi of Alexandria in Egypt, and David Prato, the future Chief Rabbi of Rome. He also got acquainted with Prof. Viterbo of Florence, with whom Taamerat will develop close relations in the years to come.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Information regarding the existence of documents related to Taamerat's inscription and studies at Florence's University archives was given by Prof. Ida Zattelli, from the Hebrew Language Department of Florence University in a public lecture which has not been published yet.

<sup>29</sup> TREVISAN SEMI 2000, 345-347. Concerning the letters of Faitlovitch to Taamerat which were destroyed by Taamerat in 1940 see *Ibid.*, 303-304: letter number 100 (28.01.1940).

<sup>30</sup> CRI 1923,9; TREVISAN SEMI 1987, 51-59; TREVISAN SEMI 2000, 367; VITERBO 1964.

## Giuseppe Levi

Throughout the years as a student at the *Collegio Rabbinico* a particular friendship developed between Taamerat and another student of that period, the future Rabbi of Casale Monferrato, Rav Giuseppe Levi.<sup>31</sup>

Giuseppe Levi was a descendent of the Della Pergola family, a local Florentine Jewish family, who, according to a recent study on the Jewish population of Florence,<sup>32</sup> originated in the Tuscan town Pitigliano, and became part of the local Florentine Jewish Ghetto population by the beginning of the nineteenth century. Various descendents of Emanuele Della Pergola from Pitigliano, members of the Della Pergola family in Florence, were either Hebrew teachers, cantors or rabbis. Among them we find: Emanuele Della Pergola who was himself a Hebrew teacher; Franca Loewenthal, a Hebrew teacher at the Jewish day school of Florence; Cesare Della Pergola, cantor (*hazan*) of the local Florentine Jewish community; Raffaello Della Pergola chief rabbi of Alexandria in Egypt (*Alessandria d'Egitto*); Alberto Della Pergola, cantor in Florence and a future *hazan* of the Bucarest Jewish community; Cesare Della Pergola, chief Rabbi of Ancona; Dario Disegni, student of the Florentine seminar and future Rabbi of the Turin Jewish Community, who later became a director and fervent animator of the Turin's section of the Italian Rabbinical School;<sup>33</sup> and finally Giuseppe Levi, the son of Leone Levi and Elena Della Pergola, the future Rabbi of Casale Monferrato.<sup>34</sup>

Giuseppe Levi was registered at the *Collegio Rabbinico* between the years 1906-1916. According to the *Collegio Rabbinico*'s publication he was ordained with the full rabbinical title of *hacham ha-shalem* in 1915, after earning, in 1910, the practical slaughter permission, the *shohet* title, and the first degree of the Rabbinical College, the *haver* title, in 1911. Complying with the *Collegio Rabbinico* regulations, he

---

<sup>31</sup> Grandfather of the author of the present article.

<sup>32</sup> VITERBO 2004, 53-56.

<sup>33</sup> On Disegni see VITERBO 2004. The Turin Rabbinical college was created as a post second world war branch of Florence's *Beit Midrash*. On Torino Rabbinical College see PAVONCELLO 1961, 17; DISEGNI 1999.

<sup>34</sup> VITERBO 2004.

got his Doctoral *Laurea* degree from Florence University, specializing in Jewish history with a thesis on the seventeenth century Italian cabbalist Nehemia Hayyun.<sup>35</sup> According to the same publication, a year after Levi was ordained as *hacham ha-shalem*, Taamerat Emmanuel earned his *maskil* title. Levi, however, had already left Florence some years before, at the beginning of 1910, as part of Margulies' policy to send the rabbinical school students outside of Florence in order to have them serve as rabbis in different and diverse communities in Italy and the Mediterranean.<sup>36</sup> Rabbi G. Levi gave his first sermon as the Rabbi of Casale Monferrato, a city located in northwest Italy between Piemonte and Lombardia, in January 1910.<sup>37</sup> Not much later, on the tenth of Av 5671 (August 4, 1911), he married Sara Bolafio, the daughter of the Chief Rabbi of Turin, Rabbi Giacomo Bolafio. As mentioned before, Turin's Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Giacomo Bolafio, was a member of the Pro-Falascia committee.<sup>38</sup>

## Taamerat Emmanuel and Giuseppe Levi

In a photograph dated 1909 (photo n. 1) three students of the *Collegio Rabbinico* are seen, in a typical arrangement of the time, with the young Taamerat in the middle and G. Levi and Romano Campani on

---

<sup>35</sup> CRI 1923, 9; LEVI 1911.

<sup>36</sup> CRI 1901; CRI 1923, 9.

<sup>37</sup> LEVI 1910; LEVI 1914; LEVI 2006, 5-16. According to a necrology in *Israel* 17 Settembre 1923, in Trieste Giuseppe Levi published together with Wegnest from the *Reale Accademia di Commercio an Antologia Commerciale*, a publication I was not able to find. According to the necrology, the publication "gli era valsa il plauso e l'incoraggiamento di tutta la stampa". Other *derashot* of Levi in print and manuscript are located at *Archivio Leo Levi, The Central Archive for the History of the Jewish People* in Jerusalem. They include among others: *Circolare del Comitato pro cultura ebraica, Manoscritto di una conferenza di G.Levi; Licenza di Shehità conferita da Rav Margulies a Giuseppe Levi; Versi d'occasione in Ebraico per le nozze di G.Levi (e Sara Bolafio), stampa 1911; Assunzione quale insegnante presso la R. Accademia di Commercio di Trieste, 1921*. For one of Levi's Zionist conclusive discourses at Casale Monferrato see LEVI 1918.

<sup>38</sup> TREVISAN SEMI 1987, 145, note 27; *Il vessillo israelitico*, 55, 1907, 89: "A Pro Falasha Movement".

his sides. The photo, made as a souvenir photo, is signed by all the three friends. While the two local students signed in Italian, Taamerat signed in Amharic. The photo transmits a genuine friendship and respect between the members of this small group which are about to grow during the coming years. It reflects as well the welcoming atmosphere in which Taamerat found himself in Florence.

The personal Archive of Giuseppe Levi did not survive the war. It was destroyed during World War II in Gorizia together with the important private library of his father-in-law, Rabbi G. Bolafio, during the German Nazi invasion of northeastern Italy. However, Taamerat Emmanuel's letters, published by Trevisan Semi,<sup>39</sup> offers us direct testimony of the friendship which continued to flourish between G. Levi and Taamerat, even after the former moved to Casale. From the *epistolario* we learn that Taamerat spent the Jewish High Holidays and other celebrations of the year 1916 with the Levi family. He was in continuous connections with Levi concerning the activities of the Pro-Falascia committee, including meetings with the treasurer of the committee Mr. Ottolenghi from Acqui.<sup>40</sup> Taamerat apparently lived in Casale between 1916-1918, and was in close connection with the Levi family during that period.<sup>41</sup> Another letter from 1918 testifies that Taamerat also worked for a short time in a factory in Casale and was in charge of the French correspondence of the factory manager. As a consequence he prolonged his stay by the Levi's.<sup>42</sup> In one of his letters to Faitlovitch from this year Taamerat complains again that besides the Ottolenghi and the Levi families he can rely on no one in case of necessity. In the same letter he conveys information concerning a few members of Levi's family mentioned above, the Della Pergola family in Florence, thus attesting to his interest in maintaining a relationship with Levi's family.<sup>43</sup> In yet another letter, dated February 1918, sent from Soresina, Taamerat speaks about a loan given to him by Faitlovitch,

---

<sup>39</sup> TREVISAN SEMI 2000.

<sup>40</sup> TREVISAN SEMI 2000, 98-99, letter n.2.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 105, letter n.4: "All'infuori della venerata anima dell'Ottolenghi e della buona famiglia Levi, in Italia nessuno m'avrebbe ospitato in casi estremi."

<sup>42</sup> *Ivi.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 104, letter n.4.

through the services of Beppino (Giuseppe Levi's nickname). A few months later Taamerat informs Faitlovitch of his intention to spend the next Passover again in Casale.<sup>44</sup> Levi appears to be involved in Taamerat's effort to keep up with tradition as well as with his general well-being. In the next letter Taamerat indeed complains once more to Faitlovitch of his solitude and of the few contacts he has with Jewish families, and on the fact that he relies for company mainly upon his regular correspondence with Beppino of Casale who will soon come to pay him a visit at his new working place in Soresina.<sup>45</sup> Levi is also his main source of information concerning Jewish life in Italy, and a year later it is again Levi who is trying to help Taamerat find a new job and take a rest after a violent Spanish flu had put his life in danger.<sup>46</sup>

The loan given to Taamerat by Faitlovitch was meant to enable him to make a living until he would find a job that did not oblige him to work on *Shabbat*.<sup>47</sup> Besides his strong relation and reliance on the Levi family, these letters show us how seriously Taamerat took his rabbinical formation in Florence. In these letters he reveals to his mentor the personal price he is paying in terms of work and stability, for keeping up with Jewish laws, asking his master Faitlovitch for advice and support. We may conclude that it was not easy to be an observant Ethiopian black Jew in northern Italy at the time. As a young and rather isolated immigrant Ethiopian Jew, we find him convinced of his choices and religious education, but at the same time rather

---

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, letter n.6 from Soresina, 20.3.1918: "in settimana partirò per Casale ove passerò le feste di Pasqua."

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 113, letter n.7: "Mi porto bene di salute, cerco più che posso di vivere ebraicamente. Soltanto con Beppino tengo una relazione epistolare continua, egli mi manda notizie ebraiche italiane...e prossimamente verrà a trovarmi a Soresina".

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-119, letter n.11.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 103, letter n.4: "Tutto questo causa scrupoli religiosi. Pazienza! Io continuerò ancora a sopportare questo giogo tradizionale" and *Ibid.*, 107, letter n.5 (from Soresina): "in meno di una settimana ho trovato in Italia diversi impieghi col riposo del sabato"; *Ibid.*, 115, letter n.9: "il dottore mi consigliava di nutrirmi di carne e il mio rifiuto ha danneggiato il mio corpo già da tempo debole."

desperate.<sup>48</sup> Taamerat continued to pay a price for his adherence to his creed throughout his life.

Soon after the end of World War I, the ways of the two friends parted. Levi left the rabbinical post at Casale for Trieste and Gorizia in northeastern Italy. He then became a lecturer at the local *R. Istituto di Commercio* of Trieste as well as a Latin Professor in a *Liceo* (high school) in Gorizia. Among his other new roles in the local Jewish communities, he was nominated the president of the Palestinian office of the Jewish community of Trieste, a main post-war port of immigration for Eastern-European Jews to Palestine.<sup>49</sup> Levi's involvement with the Zionist organization was a direct result of the strong impression the events of World War I and the Balfour declaration left on the young Rabbi, who was versed and closed to the Zionist ideas from his years in Florence under the influence of the teachings of his master Margulies.<sup>50</sup>

Taamerat for his part took upon himself a mission on behalf of the Pro-Falascia committee and left Europe for Jerusalem. He was there seriously engaged in trying to expand connections with the international Jewish community including the Jewish American and Zionists movements, for the case of the Ethiopian Jew. It opened a new chapter in his life and an enduring engagement in effort to realize the educational project for Ethiopian Jews which Faitlovitch had started years before: an educational program for Ethiopian Jews in their own territories in Ethiopia which will become the main leitmotif of Taamerat's life.<sup>51</sup>

The friendship with Levi's family was interrupted dramatically by Rav Giuseppe Levi's premature death in 1923.<sup>52</sup> It continued though in a different form during the years to come. Throughout the 1950's and

---

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 107-109, letters 5-11.

<sup>49</sup> CALIMANI 1966; CATALAN 1991(a); CATALAN 1991(b); DELLA PERGOLA 1991.

<sup>50</sup> On Levi's Zionism see LEVI 1918.

<sup>51</sup> TREVISAN SEMI 2000, 106, letter n.4 from Rome; *Ibid.*, 119, letter n.12 from Jerusalem.

<sup>52</sup> As a result of luck at the time of penicillin to cure an infection which attacked Levi after a simple operation of his knee which went out of place due to a car accident.

the 1960's, until his death in Jerusalem in 1962, Taamerat maintained contacts with Rav Levi's family, including Rabbi Levi's widow Sarah Bolafio Levi,<sup>53</sup> and Rabbi Levi's son and his spouse, Leo and Linda Levi-Valabrega.

It is through this friendship that I myself got to know Taamerat personally, as a young adolescent in the late 1950's and early 1960's and until a few months before his death.

### **Taamerat in Jerusalem: some General Considerations and Personal Memories**

Taamerat visited and lived in Jerusalem at different moments and stages of his life, under various personal and political circumstances. He first arrived as an envoy of Faitlovitch in the early twenties, as mentioned above. He then came back in the thirties, under war circumstances, with the Negus himself who found refuge in Jerusalem. He came once again to Israel in the early fifties in a political and educational mission, as part of his continuous engagement in the educational project on behalf of the Ethiopian Jews.

Between 1951-1952, Taamerat visited Jerusalem in order to discuss issues regarding the education of the Falasha Jews (*edah*) and the possible immigration of a significant number of Falasha Jews to Israel.

Taamerat throughout his educational activity was always convinced that the educational work with and for his people should be done mostly in Ethiopia. Since the early twenties he defended the particularistic history and customs of the *edah* and worked together with Faitlovitch at providing an educational infrastructure for his people in Ethiopia. This remained his position also after World War II and following the creation and birth of the state of Israel.<sup>54</sup>

Finally, from 1955 on, Taamerat was back in Jerusalem where he

---

<sup>53</sup> Whose father was member of the Pro-Falascià committee.

<sup>54</sup> TREVISAN SEMI 2000: cfr. letters 12, 51-56, 59-60, 64, 67-72, 78, 80-82, 114, 117, 123.

lived until his death, in a sort of exile, due to a political decision, made probably by the Negus himself or his administration, as a consequence of Taamerat's disengagement, during the fifties and the early sixties, from the political stances of the former Negus and now emperor Haille Selassie.<sup>55</sup> Despite his disagreement with certain aspects of the emperor's policy Taamerat maintained both close and conflicting relationships with Haille Selassie and his administration. At times he served as a cultural *attaché* of the Ethiopian embassy in Israel, and at times as an Ethiopian political figure, according to the interests of the Negus. He resided mostly in Jerusalem living in a modest environment either at the Ethiopian Embassy's residential complex on ha-Neviim Street in Jerusalem, or, often, as a guest at the western city Y.M.C.A. hotel, with its modest rooms.<sup>56</sup>

### *Personal memories*

The new circumstances, after World War II, enabled the renewal of Taamerat's friendship with the Levi family which I experienced personally.

The following paragraph is an elaboration of some personal memories concerning Taamerat's visits and stay in Jerusalem.

In private conversations around the *Shabbat* table at my parents' house on Hebron Street in Jerusalem Taamerat expressed his strong skepticism concerning the possibility of the Ethiopian Jews' integration into the Israeli society, and assimilation of modern western Jewish traditions, as understood and experienced in Israel. Taamerat, as is shown also by his epistle, was well aware, more than anybody else, of the limits of his own people and the difficulties involved in transforming radically the *edah* life conditions. As shown by Trevisan Semi his position and doubts concerning the *edah's* relation and contact with western society appear already in his correspondence with

---

<sup>55</sup> A separate work of mine will be dedicated to the topic of Taamerat Emanuel, the Negus and Jerusalem.

<sup>56</sup> On Taamerat's relations with the Negus Haille Selassie and Selassie's politics toward Jews Christians and Moslems see KAPLAN 1998, 177-178; KESSLER 1996.



Viterbo and others in the thirties, doubts reflected already in the debate and differences of opinion between him and his *maestro* Faitlovitch. His doubts were conditioned by conflicting positions concerning the *edah's* possibility of fully integrating and assimilating western culture and ways of life. It stemmed from his personal knowledge of the reality and history of the rural life conditions of the Falasha Jews and from his personal scepticism and life experience. His life experience as a Jew in Italy and his contacts with other world Jewish experiences made him come closer to a diasporic pro-Babylonian attitude, in spite of the education received at Margulies' Rabbinical School which made him remain a convinced Zionist. During his visits to our family, descendants of Giuseppe Levi, he expressed his doubts concerning a massive migration of Ethiopian Jews to Israel and the attempt made in the early fifties to settle and educate a large number of the *edah* future leaders at Kefar Batyah. Trevisan Semi annotates also on Taamerat's scepticism and ambivalence *vis à vis* European culture in general. While being an integral part of Taamerat's formation it did not correspond to the reality of his people. She also tackles the issue of Taamerat's not ever getting married. In the long conversations Taamerat had with my mother, known in Jerusalem of those years as a person of confidence, Taamerat confessed at various times of his difficulties in living in between two worlds, being completely westernized on the one hand and remaining attached to his country, family and village at the same time. I remember my mother speaking to me about his confessions which explained why he never married. He would never be able to marry a white woman due to his skin colour and history, he revealed, but at the same time, he would never be never able to marry a simple woman of his own people and tribe because of their simplicity and lack of western education. His fragile and fine simplicity of character, combined with a refined culture and knowledge of languages; his fine suits and European table manners left an unforgettable impression on me as a child. I was enchanted by the dark coloured observant Jewish person, a diplomat of a distant and remote country where ancient Jews are still living. Around the *Shabbat* table, when Taamerat was not present, we discussed and evaluated often, with empathy, the tragic

emotional and political position in which a prominent leader and diplomat of the emerging third world found himself.

Written testimonies of the ties between Taamerat and the Levi family can also be found in books and photos. From my father I have inherited a Hebrew dictionary of Yehudah Gur. On the front page it says: "Bought on behalf of the *Brit Ivrit Olamit* for Taamerat Emmanuel 1951, and bought again from Taamerat on 1952." This important Hebrew dictionary was probably bought for Taamerat when he arrived in Israel and sold back to my father when Taamerat left back for Ethiopia on 1952. As with Giuseppe Levi, the connections with my late father served for practical necessities as well as for an intellectual curiosity which strengthened a multi-generational friendship. My father, a self critical Zionist activist, could help Taamerat contain his conflicting diasporic feelings versus Zionist feelings and thoughts which concerned the planning of the *edah* future in the new post Second World War political setting, both in Africa and within Israel and the Jewish world diaspora.

Taamerat was often a guest at our *Shabbat* table during the fifties, just as he was welcomed, as well, in other Italian Jewish families, such as the Artom-Cassutto family in Jerusalem, his former teachers from Florence. In spite of his longing to Ethiopia and his ties with his family of origin, I believe his stay in Jerusalem was not only a compulsory result of changing political situation and falling out of grace, but a voluntary choice of an alternative cultural environment. Taamerat in those years found himself in an Italian Jewish environment in Jerusalem, not dissimilar from the environment he had in his young formative years in Florence and Piemonte in Italy. He let us often understand that he was not displeased with this immigrants' enclave. In Tel Aviv and Ramat Gan, together with other Italian friends from Florence, such as Dr. Genazzani (Nizani), he often visited Rav Giacomo Bolafio's daughter and widow of his friend Beppino, Sara Bolafio-Levi. These people became during those years, as in his youth, an alternative family for him. He was always treated with love and respect and invited to their family feasts, including *bar mitzva* and weddings. In a photograph from November 1960, we find Taamerat at my brother's (Yehiel Levi) wedding in Kibbutz Sha'alavim talking

vividly with my father in a family gathering as if he is part of the family, a great uncle or so (photo n. 2), in another one from the same occasion he is sitting, talking vividly, as an old man, to my grandmother Signora Sarah Bolafio-Levi together with a converted Jew from the Sannicandro southern-Italian community, who immigrated to Israel in the mid-fifties, Signora Marochella (photo n. 3). He joined efforts with my father to contribute to the Faitlovitch House in Tel Aviv. I often joined my father's visits to Taamerat while he was staying at the Y.M.C.A. and King David hotels in Jerusalem.

Strangely enough, I do not remember him visiting the Italian synagogue on Hillel Street in Jerusalem very often. Was he obliged not to do so for personal security reasons? I do not have the answer. We were aware though of the fact that he was not always free to move about as he liked and sometimes expressed concerns about the control and restrictions put on his movements by the Ethiopian authorities.

As a young Yeshiva student, living on Rav Kook Street in the centre of Jerusalem, not far from the small Ethiopian colony on ha-Neviim Street, I came several times with my mother to pay a visit to Taamerat when he was already sick and often lonely; first at Bikkur Holim hospital on ha-Neviim Street, and later, in a private home not far from there, during the terminal stage of his life. I remember well our last conversation on *Shavuot*, May 1962. He, as an elderly master, was trying to convince me to proceed seriously with my studies and to be determined about writing. "The tragedy of myself and of your father" he said to me "is that we were not determined enough in dedicating time to writing. Both your father and I," he told me, "could have written important books, but the lack of discipline prevented us from doing so." It was then that I understood the tragic intellectual aspect of Taamerat's life. A very talented man who dedicated his life to diplomatic and educational action, to his Jewish tribe and the Ethiopian homeland, which he loved and felt connected to, but deep inside aspired for an intense and creative intellectual life, a wish he felt he had not fully realized. A few months later I learned that the *charmant* Ethiopian figure of my early adolescence passed away, in the same land where the grave of his beloved and respected master Yakov Faitlovitch is found.

## Conclusions

As concluding remarks I would like to offer two more reflections concerning the relations between Italian Jews, established Judaism and the Jewish Ethiopian ethos:

1. We have already analyzed the colonial geo-political context of the German-French and Italian Falasha committees. The interest in the history of the presence of Jewish tribes in Ethiopia and the sensitivity of Italian Jewry to their fate can be seen as a direct result of the colonial and imperial aspirations of Liberal and Fascist Italy. Some other ties though connected the history of the Falasha to the history and self identity of Italian Judaism. While coming from a complete different perspective and historical experience, both communities were looking, in the new context of modern Jewish history, for a new recognition and relocation. Undoubtedly, no comparison can be made between the dramatic situation of the *edah*, and the well-being of Italian Judaism at the turn of the century. Yet, from a different perspective, both communities were and still are small minorities in a much larger Jewish context, and both strived for contacts and recognition from the rest of the Jewish world. I believe this may have been one of the reason for the emotional involvement of Italian Judaism in the saga of Ethiopian Jews.<sup>57</sup>

This co-similarity in its variations can also explain the divergence between the Faitlovitch Franco-German and the Italian committees and their sensibilities to the Falasha problem: namely the necessity to choose between a full integration into the living body of contemporary Judaism *vis à vis* a strong will to preserve a marginal and yet peculiar historical self identity. The struggle to maintain self contained historical identity in a context of a larger group of reference is still actual today for both Italian and Ethiopian Jews as well as for some other minority groups within the Jewish world.

---

<sup>57</sup> On Italian Jewry's involvement with the saga of the Falasha and its relation with the geopolitical involvement of Italy in North East Africa from the times of Philoxene Luzzatto until after the second world war see TREVISAN SEMI 1987, 41-61, including notes in 143-147. In particular her conclusions on page 61 on Italian Jewish identity and their identification with Ethiopian Jews.

2. The problem of defining pre-conditions for group boundaries and their possible flexibility demands of modern orthodox rabbinical authorities and *halachic* decision making figures to face a particular challenge, namely: what form of a pluralist definition of belonging to the Jewish collectivity can be acceptable for the *Halacha* and the Jewish law makers. For example, regarding the problem of the difference in the rituals (*minhagim*) created during history between Sephardim and Ashkenazim, Rabbi A.I. Kook established already at the beginning of the twentieth century that each community should preserve its own particular traditions (*minhagim*). He claimed that the true and pure force of the *Torah* will be revealed and elucidated through a plurality of forms. The *minhagim* may differ from each other in some important details, but on the whole not in central basic concepts, beliefs and practices. Thus, we should ask ourselves what are the limits of *halachic* flexibility concerning the Ethiopian Jews tradition and the possibility of integrating them as such in the flux of contemporary and future Jewish group identity? This is a challenge that both orthodox and non orthodox established authorities and good-willed lay organizations will have to cope with in the coming decades.<sup>58</sup>

## Bibliography

- CALIMANI R., “Trieste città di confine: Italo Svevo, Umberto Saba”, in CALIMANI R., *I destini e l'avventure dell'intellettuale ebreo 1650-1933*, Milano, Mondadori, 1966, 295-327.
- CASSUTO M.D., *Mehkarim beMikra*, Jerusalem, Magnes, 1988. (in Hebrew).
- CASSUTO M.D., *Italia*, Conference Supplement series, BONFIL R. (ed.), Jerusalem, Magnes, 2005.
- CATALAN T., “L'emigrazione ebraica in Palestina attraverso il porto di Trieste (1908-1938)”, *Qualestoria: Bollettino dell'Istituto regionale per*

---

<sup>58</sup> See CORINALDI 1988, 193-233; appendices I-VII: Rabbi's Responsas and Decision, 235-265; GOREN 1966; KAPLAN 1988; WALDMAN 1996; TREVISAN SEMI 1987, 25-39.

- la storia del movimento di liberazione nel Friuli – Venezia Giulia*, 2-3, 1991(a), 57-107.
- CATALAN T., “Società e sionismo a Trieste fra XIX e XX secolo”, in TASCHINI G. e ZORATTINI P.C.I. (eds.), *Il Mondo Ebraico. Gli ebrei tra Italia nord-orientale e Impero asburgico dal Medioevo all’Età contemporanea*, Pordenone, Studio Tesi, 1991(b), 457-491.
- COLLEGIO RABBINICO ITALIANO, *Relazione sull’Istituto Rabbिनico di Firenze*, Firenze, Tip. Galletti e Cassuto, 1898.
- COLLEGIO RABBINICO ITALIANO, *Relazione del collegio rabbिनico italiano sul biennio 1899 – 1900*, Firenze, Tip. Galletti e Cassuto, 1901.
- COLLEGIO RABBINICO ITALIANO, *Sesta relazione*, Firenze, Tip. Galletti e Cassuto, 1923.
- COMITATO ITALIANO DI ASSISTENZA AGLI EMIGRANTI EBREI, *Cenni sull’Emigrazione nell’ultimo cinquantennio e relazione sull’attività del Comitato negli anni 1924-1927*, Trieste, Tip. Del Lloyd Triestino, 1928.
- CORINALDI M., *Yahadut Etiopia, zehut u-massoret*, Jerusalem, Reuven Mass., 1988. (in Hebrew)
- DELLA PERGOLA S., “Trasformazioni socio demografiche degli ebrei a Trieste e in Italia Nord-Orientale (XIX e XX secolo)”, in TASCHINI G. e ZORATTINI P.C.I. (eds.), *Il Mondo Ebraico. Gli ebrei tra Italia nord-orientale e Impero asburgico dal Medioevo all’Età contemporanea*, Pordenone, Studio Tesi, 1991, 517-553.
- DISEGNI R.I., “Programmi di studio della Scuola Rabbिनica Italiana 1829-1999”, *Rassegna mensile di Israel*, LXV, terza serie, 1999, 1-40.
- ELIAV M., “The Awakening of West European Jewry to the Assistance of the Falashas”, *Tarbiz*, 49, 1965, 61-67. (in Hebrew)
- FAITLOVITCH J., *Notes d’un voyage chez les Falachas (Juifs d’Abyssinie)*, Paris, Leroux, 1905.
- FAITLOVITCH J., “Les Falachas, d’apres les explorateurs: notes apologetiques”, *Rivista Israelitica*, 4, 3, 1907(a), 1-15.
- FAITLOVITCH J., *Gli Ebrei d’Abissinia (Falascia): Impressioni dal Vero*, Acqui, Comitato Pro-Falascia, 1907(b).
- FAITLOVITCH J., “Per la storia del Movimento Pro-Falascia (Due documenti)”, *Rivista Israelitica*, 6, 1909, 237.
- FAITLOVITCH J., *Quer durch Abessinien: Meine zweite Reise zu den Falaschas*, Berlin, Poppelauer, 1910.
- FINZI M. and MARGULIES S.H. and OTTOLENGHI R., “Pro-Falascià, il conflitto coll’Alliance”, *Il Corriere Israelitico*, 46, 1908, 287-288.

- GIDNEY W.T., *The History of the London society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews*, London, London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews, 1908.
- GOREN S., "Origin and Status of the Falasha", *Sefer Torat Hamedinah*, Jerusalem, Haidra Rabbah, 1966, 172-208.
- GRINFELD I., "Taamrat Emmanuel, Mevasser ha-tehiyyah shel yehudei Etiopiah", *Pe'amim*, 22, 1985, 59-74 (in Hebrew).
- GRINFELD I., "Jacques Faitlovich: 'Father' of the Falasha", in AVNER Y. et Al. (eds.), *The Jews of Ethiopia: A community in Transition*, Tel Aviv, Bet Hatefutzot, 1986, 30-35.
- HALÉVY J., "Rapport au Comité Central de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle", *Bulletin de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle*, 1868, 27-35.
- KAPLAN S., "A note on the Hebrew Letters of Prester John", *Journal of Semitic Studies (JJS)*, 36, 1985(a), 230-232.
- KAPLAN S., "On the Ethiopian Judeo-Christian Context of the history of Beta-Israel", *Pe'amim*, 22, 1985(b), 17-31.
- KAPLAN S., "The Beta Israel (Falasha) Encounter with Protestant Missionaries, 1860-1905", *Jewish Social Studies*, 49, 1, 1987, 27-42.
- KAPLAN S., "The Beta Israel and the Rabbinate: Law, Politics and Ritual" *Social Science Information*, 28, 3, 1988, 357-370.
- KAPLAN S., *The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia: From Earliest times to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, New York, N.Y. University Press, 1992.
- KAPLAN S., "Falasha Christians: A Brief History", *Midstream*, 39, 1, 1993, 20-21.
- KAPLAN S., "A History of Beta Israel", in CORINALDI M. (ed.), *Jewish Identity, The case of Ethiopian Jewry*, Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 1998, 174-178.
- KAPLAN S. and BEN-DOR S. (eds.), *Ethiopian Jewry: An annotated Bibliography*, Jerusalem, Ben Tzvi Institute, 1988.
- KESSLER D., *The Falashas. A Short History of the Ethiopian Jews*, 2ed., London and Portland, Oregon, Frank Cass, 1996.
- LEVI G., "Nechemia Hayoun", *Il Vessillo Israelitico*, Casale Monferrato, Pane G., 1911.
- LEVI G., *Discorso tenuto al Tempio la prima sera di capo d'anno 5679 (6 settembre 1918). Pubblicato per desiderio ed a cura di alcuni zelanti*, Casale Monferrato, Tipografia Popolare, 1918.
- LEVI G., "Le iscrizioni del Sacro tempio israelitico di Casale Monferrato", in *La sinagoga di Casale Monferrato: Cenni storico-illustrativi*, Casale Monferrato, Edizione comunità Israelitica di Casale Monferrato, 1969.

- LEVI G., “Sermon of Rabbi Giuseppe Levi January 22nd, 1910 (Parashat Be-Shalach) – a photostatic reproduction of an original manuscript”, in LEVI J., *Dieci anni a Firenze, Dalle derashot di Rav Joseph Levi*, Firenze, Giuntina, 2006, 5-16.
- LEVI J., *Dieci anni a Firenze, Dalle derashot di Rav Joseph Levi*, Firenze, Giuntina, 2006.
- LEVI J., “Il collegio rabbinico di Firenze 1899-1934”, in *Atti del Convegno in occasione del centenario dalla nascita’ di Umberto Cassuto*, Facoltà di lettere e filosofia, Università di Firenze, (forthcoming).
- LUZZATTO P., “Memoire sur les Juifs d’Abissinie ou Falashas”, *Archive Israelite*, 12, 1851-54, 12-15.
- MARGULIES S.H., *Discorsi Sacri*, Firenze, Galletti e Cassuto, 1905. (2nd ed., Roma, Edizioni Israel, 1956; *Discorsi e scritti vari*, 1923)
- MARGULIES S.H., *Per la storia del movimento Pro-Falascia: due documenti*, Firenze, Galletti e Cassuto, 1909.
- MESSING S., *The Story of the Falashas: “Black Jews” of Ethiopia*, New York, Balshon printing & offset, 1982.
- NAHOUM H., “Mission chez les Falachas d’Abyssinie”, *Bulletin de l’Alliance Israélite Universelle*, 33, 1908, 100-137.
- NEPPI MODONA A., “17 lettere di S.H.Margulies a David Levi”, *Rassegna Mensile di Israel*, 27, fasc.11, and 28, fasc.2, 1962.
- NEPPI MODONA A., “Ricordi personali su S.H. Margulies”, *Rassegna Mensile di Israel*, Aprile 1972, 3-10.
- PAVONCELLO N., “Il collegio rabbinico a Torino”, in *Il Collegio Rabbinico italiano*, Saladini, 1961.
- QUIRIN J.A., *The Evolution of the Ethiopian Jews: A history of the Beta Israel (Falasha) to 1920*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992.
- SALAMON A., “Reflections of Ethiopian Cultural Patterns on the Beta Israel Absorption in Israel”, in KAPLAN S. and PARFITT T. and TREVISAN SEMI E. (eds.), *Between Africa and Zion: Proceedings of the First International Congress of the Society for the Study of Ethiopian Jewry*, Jerusalem, 1995, 126-130.
- SUMMERFIELD D.P., *From Falashas to Ethiopian Jews: The External Influences for Change c.1860-1960*, London and New York, Routledge Curzon, 2003.
- TREVISAN SEMI E., *Allo Specchio dei Falascià: ebrei ed etnologi durante il colonialismo fascista*, Firenze, Giuntina, 1987.
- TREVISAN SEMI E., “Faitlovitch, Margulies and the Alliance: Which educational Policy for the Ethiopian Jews in 1907?”, in CROWN A.D.



- (ed.), *Noblesse Oblige: Essays in Honor of David Kessler*, London, Vallentine Mitchell, 1998, 69-82.
- TREVISAN SEMI E., *L'epistolario di Taamrat Emmanuel*, Torino, L'Harmattan Italia, 2000.
- ULLENDORF E. and BACKINGHAM C.F., *The Hebrew Letters of Prester John*, London, Oxford University Press, 1982.
- VITERBO C.A., "Notizie tristi: Emanuel Taamrat", *Israel*, 9.1.1964.
- VITERBO L., *La comunità ebraica di Firenze nel censimento del 1841*, Roma, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2004.
- WALDMAN M., "An Appeal on Behalf of the Ethiopian Jews(Falasha): Rabbi Azriel Hildesheimer", *Sinai*, 95, 1984, 232-239. (in Hebrew)
- WALDMAN M., "The return to Judaism of the Falashmura", *Tehumim* 16, 1996, 143-272. (in Hebrew)

### **Archives**

CENTRAL ARCHIVE FOR THE HISTORY OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE,  
Hebrew University, Jerusalem: *Trieste RI-list number 51*.



1. November 2nd 1909. From left to right: Rav Giuseppe Levi, Taamerat Emmanuel, Romeo Campani.



2. Kibbutz Shaalavim, November 1960. Standing: Taamerat Emmanuel and Leo Levi (son of Rav Giuseppe Levi).



3. Kibbutz Shaalavim, November 1960. From left to right: Sara Bolafio Levi, Taamerat Emmanuel, signora Marochella (native of San Nicandro, Southern Italy).



ALEKA YAACOV: UNDISPUTED  
HEALER AND LEADER AMONG ETHIOPIAN JEWS

*Anita Nudelman, Ben-Gurion University and Melkamu Yaacov,  
Ministry of Education, Israel<sup>1</sup>*

## **Introduction**

Aleka Yaacov Mahari was an undisputed leader among *Beta Israel* for many decades, both in Ethiopia and in Israel. He grew up and spent most of his life in a village in the Gondar area in northwest Ethiopia, which was the centre of *Beta Israel* spiritual life. Like most Jewish villages, his native village was composed of extended family members, which ensured mutual support among them.

Western-scientific medicine had a very small impact on Ethiopia's largely rural population. Therefore traditional medicine catered to the daily health needs of the community. It was usually the only familiar and culture-significant means of coping with illness and other life problems.<sup>2</sup>

In Ethiopia, Aleka Yaacov was admired and respected not only by *Beta Israel*, but also by Christian and Muslim neighbours, as well

---

<sup>1</sup> The first author of this paper learned basic Amharic and was a familiar figure in Aleka Yaacov's waiting room, in ceremonies and at special family events. She employed the classical anthropological method of participant observation and in-depth ethnographic interviews. In addition to formal interviews, notes were taken during hundreds of daily informal conversations with him and his family. People seeking his assistance and others who were cured by him were also interviewed. The second author, a sociologist, brought with him the insider's view, since he was also Aleka Yaacov's son. Both perspectives complemented each other and contributed to the success of the field work and to its in-depth analysis.

<sup>2</sup> NUDELMAN 1993, 234.

as by the local and regional authorities. Upon immigration to Israel he became an important moral authority, who was sought out as a mediator in religious, personal, and communal issues. His life-long contribution to his community was through healing and the promotion of traditional Ethiopian Jewish values and education. This article is based on extended research from an outsider-insider perspective, throughout two decades.

### **Life-History in Ethiopia (1908-1986)**

Aleka Yaacov Mahari was born in the village of Tedda in the area of Gondar, Ethiopia, on July 24, 1908 (1901 according to the Ethiopian calendar) to Mahari Bruk and Turunesh Sahalo. He was originally named Mengistu. On September 20-21 of that same year, Dr. Jacques Faitlovitch, the Polish scholar who studied in Paris and dedicated his life to Ethiopian Jews,<sup>3</sup> visited Tedda bringing the news of the existence of other Jews outside of Ethiopia. Baby Mengistu's name was changed to Yaacov in Faitlovitch's honor, who was also known by his Hebrew name Yaacov. A short time after, the family moved to the village of Walaqa.<sup>4</sup>

When Dr. Faitlovitch returned to Ethiopia in 1920 and taught children in Walaqa,<sup>5</sup> young Yaacov Mahari was among his pupils together with Yona Bogale, who years later was to become the leader of Ethiopian Jewry and its connection to Diaspora Jews.<sup>6</sup> Although Yaacov was among the candidates selected by Dr. Faitlovitch to study abroad, his mother opposed his leaving home at such an early age. His mother died shortly after Dr. Faitlovitch left Ethiopia and the family moved to the village of Sawaj, in the area of Chehera, where Yaacov lived until his immigration to Israel in 1986. He was married at the age of 17 and began taking responsibility for his father's farm. He worked

---

<sup>3</sup> TREVISAN SEMI 2007.

<sup>4</sup> WEIL 2010 (forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> KESSLER 1996, 137.

<sup>6</sup> WEIL 1987.

very hard in diversifying the farm to include sheep, cattle, and bees, thus increasing the family assets.

Aleka Yaacov's legacy was three-fold: through healing, the contribution to his community by the strengthening of traditional Jewish values and the promotion of education.

### **The Power of Healing**

Aleka Yaacov had supernatural powers and insights. Thus, alongside the farm work, he practiced traditional medicine and became a famous healer.

This process began when he was a child; he became ill and hid from people. He recalled that he suddenly found himself next to the Gumara River, and then inside it. He saw strange figures of different colours, similar to human beings (*zar* spirits or *kole*) who lived in a world of their own, parallel to the human ones. They talked to him and took him to their leader, who asked Yaacov what he desired. Yaacov responded that he wanted to feel well and to return home to his family. The leader gave him a golden walking stick (*yework zeng*) and told him that he would leave the place with special powers because he had been chosen to mediate between the human and the hidden worlds. Thus, everything that he would do and say hereon would have a big significance.

Yaacov emerged from the river after seven days, which to him seemed like seven years. He was received with love by his family and neighbours, who had feared for his life since his unexplained disappearance. He then proceeded to seclude himself, living in complete purity for seven years, in which he did not have physical contact with other people and even spoke to them from a distance. During this period, only one man (*kedami*) was allowed to prepare his *buna* (ritual coffee ceremony). In the beginning it was prepared seven or eight times a day and later on three times (morning, noon, and before sunset). If the *kole* spirit was around, coffee was also prepared at midnight.

From an early age Yaacov began treating both adults and children who suffered from a variety of physical and mental ailments and life problems. He also was clairvoyant and could discover the occult. According to others, ever since he was a child, things that Aleka Yaacov said came true. For example, he could look at a pregnant woman and tell her if she was carrying a son or a daughter (according to his children's explanation: a kind of traditional Ultra Sound). Thus people began to seek his advice.

Sometimes his visions caused discomfort because young Yaacov could actually see through a person, accusing him of being a thief, a traitor or even of cheating on his wife. Community elders feared that these visions could lead to conflicts with their non-Jewish neighbours, to the extent that someone would get hurt, or, worse, even get murdered. Thus Yaacov's guiding spirits decided that from thereon he would work only as a healer, a mediator, and a person who does good deeds. He became so famous that people from all social classes, religions, and ethnic groups from different regions of Ethiopia and even from abroad, came to seek his advice and assistance.<sup>7</sup> He used to charge Muslims and Christians for his assistance, but did not take money from Jews who often brought him gifts or volunteered to work in his farm after being healed. He received the title *Aleka*, meaning chief, which was only accorded to very wise and powerful men.<sup>8</sup> He became a teacher and an expert in his field.

In the 1940's, the governor of the area asked Aleka Yaacov to help him find the appropriate site in which to build a main town. He visited various sites with the governor and his entourage and finally indicated the desired location. In order to test him, the governor insisted that he must be the first person to build his home there, which he did. Today it is the bustling town of Maksenyit, 42 km south of the city of Gondar.

Aleka Yaacov's healing techniques can be divided into three parts, encompassing different categories of traditional healers documented in Ethiopia.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Personal communication with Judge Bayuh Bejابه and his father, an elder from the village of Chehera, Gondar Province, 1992.

<sup>8</sup> MESSING et BENDER 1985, 114.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. *Ibid.* 343; MESSING 1968, 91; YOUNG 1976, 151; YOUNG 1977; BISHAW



a) Use of herbal medicines mostly to cure children's diseases and barren women, as well as problems related to female-male relationships and livelihood.

b) Divination through *awdinigist* texts in order to foresee future events in a country, in the world or the destiny of specific individuals. Everything about a person's character, his relations with his family and his surroundings, as well as the suitability between husband and wife could be discovered through astrological predictions, numerical calculations and formulas from these texts. They were used to understand a variety of illnesses and life problems and to determine the appropriate solutions.<sup>10</sup> Personalised *Ketab*<sup>11</sup> - amulets written on goat skin or parchment - were then prepared. Aleka Yaacov's books were handwritten and personally modified by him, in order to make them compatible with Ethiopian Jewish culture.

After the divination process, people were sometimes sent to healing waters: *mawot* (hot) or *tebel* (cold). Those suffering from pains (muscular or other) or skin rashes were sent to *mawot*, while the ones with mental or behavioural ones to *tebel*. People were given instructions exactly on what dates to travel and how long they must remain there in order for the treatment to succeed: mostly odd numbers such as three, five or seven days. After their stay in the healing water they were usually given an amulet or a special kind of necklace in order to preserve the cure undertaken.

c) Treatment according to *zar* divination, especially for mental illness, in which the parallel world was consulted.<sup>12</sup> First he determined if the problem was really due to a *zar* spirit and not some other kind of spirit or cause. Then he identified the type of *zar* spirit (as well as what jewellery and clothes it used). Since an angry *zar* spirit could harm any family member, Aleka Yaacov sought an immediate solution,

---

1989, 82; NUDELMAN 1993, 234.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. SHELEMAY 1992; NUDELMAN 1999, 273; REMENIK, CHAMBERS and PERSOON 2007, 3; YOUNG 1977, 187.

<sup>11</sup> A *Ketab* is sometimes considered a magical scroll with powerful protective properties (see MERCIER 1979).

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. MESSING 1958, 1122; KAHANA 1985, 133.

which usually included placating the spirit and nurturing it through ceremonies and gifts.<sup>13</sup>

Aleka Yaacov's compound in his village in Ethiopia included a number of living quarters for family members, as well as other buildings for different uses, among them a "traditional clinic". In this building, he daily received people seeking assistance; he saw them in accordance to the order of their arrival or the seriousness of their case. The building included an area, called the *kaloa*, used mostly on special celebrations related to *zar* spirits such as Kades Yohanes, Gabriel, and Mikael. On these specific occasions Aleka Yaacov attended behind a *megareja*, a colourful curtain, so people could not see him while he communicated with the spirits. The place was decorated with objects of live colours, incense and trays with small coffee cups (*finjals*).

*Case study: a student with hepatitis*

Yosef, a student, had a severe case of hepatitis and was near death. Aleka Yaacov treated him for seven days with herbal medicines, which made him vomit a lot. He then returned to Addis Abeba and was not heard from until he reappeared in the village nine years later, bringing a gun covered in gold as a gift. At first he was not recognised. Then he recounted the story of his illness and treatment, emphasizing that after it, he had become healthy and had done well in life. He also told them that while he was a student in Addis Ababa he had participated in a demonstration in which bullets were fired, killing many students. Yosef had lain down on the asphalt road and begged for Aleka Yaacov's *wukabe* (spirit) to protect him. He took an oath that if he survived he would ask his grandfather to give his most prized possession, namely the golden gun, to Aleka Yaacov. He then proceeded to travel 748 kilometres to fulfil this pledge. Everyone was deeply moved by this episode and Aleka Yaacov kept the gun until his immigration to Israel.

---

<sup>13</sup> REMENIK, CHAMBERS and PERSOON 2007, 4.

## Contribution to Community, Family and Education in Ethiopia

Aleka Yaacov dedicated himself to strengthening both the faith and the status of the Jews in Ethiopia. Many *qessoch* (religious leaders) and *shmagloch* (elders) came to consult him, respecting his opinions and arbitrations. On different occasions he took advantage of his status and personal contacts in order to protect his community.

Aleka Yaacov was famous for his generosity and kind heartedness, helping both adults and children in a modest way. When he travelled around the countryside he always had a stock of razors, needles, soap, matches and other basic items with him, distributing them to needy people. He used to say: “a match can give light instead of darkness; a needle can mend torn clothes; a razor can be used to shave the hair of a child and rid it of lice.” People would remember these small actions for a long time and whenever they met Aleka Yaacov they would kiss his hand as a way of expressing their gratitude and respect.

Aleka Yaacov began contributing to the Jewish community after the memorial ceremony held on the first anniversary of his father’s death (1954). He assisted in building prayer houses in different villages. When the *qessoch* decided to build a synagogue in the village of Ambober, the spiritual centre of Ethiopian Jewry where the main yearly *Segd* celebration took place<sup>14</sup>, they approached Aleka Yaacov for assistance and he contributed a generous sum. Nevertheless, they ran out of money before the roof was completed. Hearing about this, Aleka Yaacov proceeded to buy all the necessary materials, also supplying carpets, as well as sheep for the inauguration ceremony.<sup>15</sup> Since 1954 Aleka Yaacov also distributed *shash*, - the white material used for the *qessoch*’s traditional head covers - to every *qes*, at the yearly *Segd* celebration, together with money for charity. He also took care of *qessoch* who lived far away in the Wogera, Semien, and Tigray provinces, sending them their *shash* with travellers.

---

<sup>14</sup> On the *Segd* festival, unique to the *Beta Israel*, see QUIRIN 2010 (forthcoming).

<sup>15</sup> *Qes* Adane - one of the most distinguished *qessoch* both in Ethiopia and Israel - recalled this event on his condolence visit to Aleka Yaacov’s family’s during the *shiva* (seven day mourning period) in February 2007.

In addition to the aforesaid activities related to healing and to community issues, Aleka Yaacov continued with agricultural work and raising cattle, which he loved. He kept a big farm with many people working for him. His extended family was around him, including his children and their own families and many other relatives. On Jewish holidays and other events, all the family members gathered from afar, preparing feasts, participating in ceremonies and listening to Aleka Yaacov's stories and teachings.

When Dr. Faitlovitch's students returned from Europe to Ethiopia, well educated and elegantly dressed, Yaacov was impressed and deeply regretted that he had not been among them. This prompted him to take a solemn oath that he would educate his own children. He contributed to his children's future, foreseeing their destinies and guiding them – even in years when they were physically apart (as most of them had arrived in Israel before him). He sent six out of ten of his children to study, during a period of time when this was not customary among Ethiopian Jews. Some people in his village even complained to him about this, sustaining that it was wrong for his children to study instead of working in the fields. They feared that students, who came in contact with the outside world, could bring a strange and impure culture to their village. Aleka Yaacov responded by quoting Dr. Faitlovitch's message about the importance of education for the younger generations: “The day will come when we will go to Jerusalem and our brothers there will have skills and knowledge. Therefore at least two children in each family should study, so when that day arrives they will be our guides.”

Since 1954 up to his immigration to Israel, in addition to giving *shash* to the *qessoch* at the *Segd* celebration every year, Aleka Yaacov distributed pens, pencils, notebooks, and footballs to every *Beta Israel* pupil in Ambober and in other *Beta Israel* village schools, who anxiously awaited him. He considered this as a way of strengthening and encouraging them to excel and continue in their studies.

## **The Dream of Jerusalem**

During the Six Day War in 1967, Aleka Yaacov was deeply concerned about Israel's future. Throughout the war, he slept on the floor, praying day and night for his brethren. He took a solemn oath that if Israel won, he would contribute a generous amount of money to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

In all public events and gatherings Aleka Yaacov would recall a dream in which he had a vision of Ethiopian Jews arriving in Jerusalem, fulfilling a dream of generations by returning to the Holy Land. He said that the day in which they would go to Jerusalem was getting closer and closer.

When immigration via Sudan began in the early 1980's, he took care of many people's safe passage, including paying guides to take them across the border, using his personal connections, as well as financially supporting them on their journey.

During all this period, he continued dreaming of the day in which his personal yearning for Jerusalem would be fulfilled.

## **Life-History in Israel (1986-2007)**

Upon arrival in Israel in 1986, he knelt, kissed the soil, and was full of joy. Then he took money out of his pocket and requested to be taken to Jerusalem to fulfil his pledge. He was then informed that the Holy Temple did not exist anymore. After consulting with family members, Aleka Yaacov decided to donate the whole sum to the LIBI Fund, which supports soldiers of the Israel Defence Forces.

Aleka Yaacov tried to understand the lifestyle in Western urban and pluralistic Israeli society, which was very different from the one in traditional rural villages in Ethiopia. He saw both its positive and negative aspects. He listened avidly to Israel Radio's official broadcasts in Amharic and asked his children and other people many questions. Throughout the years, Aleka Yaacov had the opportunity to meet with local and national political leaders, as well as with Israelis from a wide range of professions and countries of origin. He was interested in everybody and everything.

He demonstrated a great sense of humour when referring to some new problems in Israel, which were unheard of among the Jews in their native villages in Ethiopia. For example, when relating to unplanned adolescent pregnancy, as in the case of a relative who gave birth to a baby three months after her wedding ceremony, he said: "In Ethiopia our mothers suffered pregnancy for nine months. Here in Israel everything happens faster, even pregnancy has been reduced to three months."

Aleka Yaacov had ten children and many grandchildren and great-grandchildren. From the day of his arrival in Israel, they would join him for special occasions and holidays. The sons, daughters, and grandchildren took on specific tasks, such as accompanying Aleka Yaacov to select and slaughter a sheep, gathering specific aromatic and medicinal plants, decorating the house and preparing food. On these occasions he always distributed gifts to every child. After all the preparations were completed, the family shared a feast, prayers and ceremonies. They sat together for hours reminiscing Jewish traditions and life in Ethiopia, discussing their lives in Israel and receiving their father's advice and blessings.<sup>16</sup>

## **Healing in Israel**

Aleka Yaacov thought that he would retire in Israel, imagining an ideal life in the Holy Land. But soon after his arrival, community members from all over the country began visiting his home in the immigration centre and requesting his assistance in coping with a variety of problems, many of them related to the difficult transitional process from traditional to Western society. They expressed their faith in him, and he tried to calm them and to deal with their problems in a familiar way.<sup>17</sup> Aleka Yaacov worked very hard, even accommodating some of his curing techniques to the realities of life in Israeli society, in order to facilitate community members' integration in their new

---

<sup>16</sup> The first author also had the honour to share many of these occasions with them.

<sup>17</sup> NUDELMAN 2001.

hometown. For example, he sometimes added a name or changed a patient's surname in order to enhance his/her compatibility, instead of encouraging people in distress to get divorced or move their place of residence, as was common practice in Ethiopia.

Aleka Yaacov accepted scientific medicine and understood its strengths, as well as its weaknesses. He had the opportunity to reminisce about the combination of traditional and modern healing in 1987, when he met Dr. Dan Harel, the Israeli physician who opened the first three clinics funded by Jewish organisations in Ethiopia in the early 1960's.<sup>18</sup>

Throughout more than two decades in Israel, Aleka Yaacov helped thousands of Ethiopian immigrants with interpersonal, physical, behavioural and mental problems, including many who had been hospitalised in psychiatric institutions in Israel.<sup>19</sup> Using culturally-significant healing he gave them both health and hope for a better future. In addition, many Israeli patients from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds also came to seek his assistance - some even bringing along their own translator.

### *Case study 1: Pregnancy at risk*

Aveva had been very sick and was pregnant. Her doctors advised her to have an abortion, which upset her terribly, so she decided to visit Aleka Yaacov. After consulting his book, he indicated that according to her stars she is carrying a boy in her womb and that she should not have the abortion. He prepared some herbal medicine and told her to drink it during seven days and to return to see him again a month later. Aveva decided against having the abortion, while at the same time taking a solemn oath. A few months later she gave birth to a healthy son and came to fulfil her pledge, bringing a live sheep into Aleka Yaacov's third floor apartment in the city of Lod!

---

<sup>18</sup> HAREL 1967, 484.

<sup>19</sup> NUDELMAN 2001, 151.

### *Case study 2: A behavioural problem*

Esther was a woman in her late thirties from the Qwara region. She did not have a husband and had lost four children in Ethiopia. She was brought to Aleka Yaacov's home after having been through a series of medical treatments and spending time in a psychiatric hospital. The day she arrived, she was behaving strangely, speaking incoherently with uncontrolled movements of her body and was completely cross-eyed. According to Aleka Yaacov, this situation was caused by a combination of an angry family *zar* spirit (*wukabe*) and a long-term conflict with her sister. Esther remained at his home for a long period of time, undergoing different treatments, including drinking *awza*, a strong fermented drink based on honey and chat leaves. This cleansed her body and she slowly began to function again. She was then declared cured, and received a blessing from Aleka Yaacov. But, Esther refused to leave, begging to stay on in order to prepare *buna* (ritual coffee ceremony) and help in the household. Eventually she went home and made up with her sister, returning every holiday to assist the family in their preparations. After this successful case, more people from the Qwara community began to consult Aleka Yaacov. Even the social workers who had taken care of Esther were surprised by her recovery and came to enquire about it.

### **Contribution to Community, Family and Education in Israel**

Just as he had done in Ethiopia for more than thirty years, Aleka Yaacov continued distributing a *shash* to every *qes* at the *Segd* celebration in Jerusalem until 2006, the year before his death (in February 2007). He partially supported the memorial monument which was erected on Mt. Herzl in Jerusalem in honour of the Ethiopian Jews who perished in Sudan on the way to Israel in the early 1980's; he also contributed to *Beta Israel* synagogues in Lod and in other cities in Israel. On May 26, 2008 the Ethiopian community's synagogue in Lod was named after Aleka Yaacov Mahari.

Throughout his life, Aleka Yaacov worked towards the unity of his community. In Israel, he was often requested to serve as a mediator



when tensions rose, for example between neighbours, community leaders and different groups of *qessoch*.

Aleka Yaacov always encouraged family members, as well as young people who came to seek his assistance, to pursue their studies, seeing this as the path to success in their integration into Israeli society. He even supported some of them financially in this endeavour.

### **Dr. Faitlovich's Legacy**

Dr. Yaacov Faitlovitch was an inspiration to Aleka Yaacov during his lifetime. He was the first white man he ever saw, appearing in the village on a horse - like a vision – and bringing a message from Diaspora Jewry. Aleka Yaacov remembered him teaching the children and opening their minds to Hebrew and to new prayers, while strengthening their love for Jerusalem.

Aleka Yaacov – as well as many others of his contemporaries - was in awe of this man who dedicated his life to Ethiopian Jewry. He used to repeat with great pride that Ethiopian Jews were *Ye-Faitlovitch le-joch* (Faitlovitch's children), considering his total commitment to Ethiopian Jews and also the fact that Faitlovitch had none of his own.

Aleka Yaacov was to remember the Hebrew prayers and songs learnt as a child from Dr. Faitlovitch throughout all his life, and at the age 98 could still sing the chants from popular Jewish prayers such as *Adon Olam* (Master of the Universe)<sup>20</sup> and *Lecha Dodi* (Come my Beloved)<sup>21</sup> chanted every Friday night by Jews welcoming the *Sabbath* as a queen.

After Dr. Faitlovitch's death in 1955 and the memorial service that was held the following year in the village of Ambober near Gondar, which he attended,<sup>22</sup> Aleka Yaacov strove to continue in Dr. Faitlovitch's path.

---

<sup>20</sup> This is one of the most well-known hymns in the whole of Jewish liturgy. Its origins and date of composition are unknown.

<sup>21</sup> This song was composed by Rabbi Shlomo Halevi Alkabetz, a Safed Kabbalist, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It is recited at sundown on Friday night at the beginning of the Sabbath.

<sup>22</sup> WEIL 1987.

Yaacov Faitlovitch was a role model for Aleka Yaacov, in a similar way in which Aleka Yaacov was an inspiration for thousands of Ethiopian Jews whose lives he influenced by guiding them, curing them, alleviating their suffering, giving them hope, and by being a sensitive and unique human being.

He was an undisputed leader and healer among Ethiopian Jews, who dedicated his life to strengthening his community and its cultural, educational and spiritual values, by acting as a moderating force both in Ethiopia and in Israel. As a tribute to him, thousands of Ethiopian Jews come to pay their respects at the yearly remembrance event held by his family.

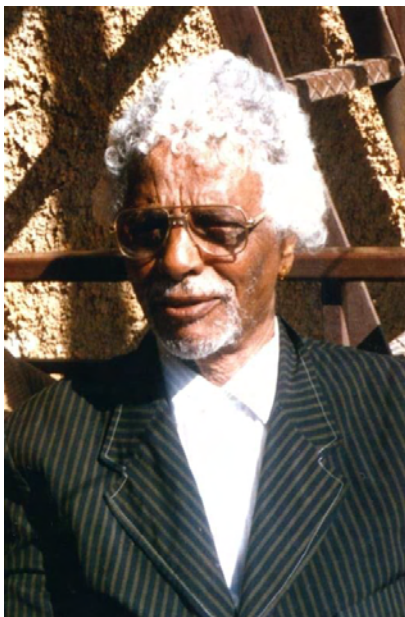
## Bibliography

- BISHAW M., "The Implication of Indigenous Medical Beliefs to Biomedical Medicine", *The Ethiopian Journal of Health Development*, 3, 1989, 75-90.
- HAREL D., "Medical Work among the Falashas of Ethiopia", *Israel Journal of Medical Sciences*, 3, 1967, 483-490.
- KAHANA Y., "The Zar Spirits, a Category of Magic in the System of Mental Health Care in Ethiopia", *The International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 31, 1985, 125-143.
- KESSLER D., *The Falashas: A Short History of the Ethiopian Jews* (3rd edition), London, Frank Cass, 1996.
- MERCIER J., *Ethiopian Magical Scrolls*, New York, G. Braziller, 1979.
- MESSING S., "Group Therapy and Social Status in the Zar Cult of Ethiopia", *American Anthropologist*, 60, 1958, 1120-1126.
- MESSING S., "Interdigitation of Mystical and Physical Healing in Ethiopia", *Behavior Science Notes*, 3, 1968, 87-104.
- MESSING S. and BENDER L., *Highland Plateau Amhara of Ethiopia*, New Haven, Connecticut, Human Relations Area Files Inc., 1985.
- NUDELMAN A., "The Importance of Traditional Healing for Ethiopian Immigrants in Israel", *Collegium Anthropologicum*, 17, 1993, 233-239.
- NUDELMAN A., "Divination as Prevention of Illness and other Life Problems", in PARFITT T. and TREVISAN SEMI E. (eds.), *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel*, Surrey, Curzon Press, 1999, 264-274.

- NUDELMAN A., "Zar Spirits in Ethiopia and Israel and their Impact on Ethiopian Immigrants' Health", in OCHOLLA-AYAYO A.B.C., NYAMONGO I., IKAMARI L. and ATENG T. (eds.), *Population, Health and Development in Africa: Anthropological Perspectives*, Population Studies and Research Institute, Nairobi, Kenya, 2001, 146-153.
- QUIRIN J., "Segd", in SIEGBERT U. (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Aethiopia*, Wiesbaden, 2010 (forthcoming).
- REMENIK R., CHAMBERS R. & PERSOON J., "Healers", in SIEGBERT U. (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Aethiopia*, 3, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007, 3-5.
- SHELEMAY K.K., "The Musician and Transmission of Religious Tradition: the Multiple Roles of the Ethiopian Dabbara", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 22, 1992, 242-260.
- TREVISAN SEMI E., *Jacques Faitlovitch and the Jews of Ethiopia*, London, Vallentine Mitchell, 2007.
- YOUNG A., "Internalizing and Externalizing Medical Belief Systems: an Ethiopian Example", *Social Science and Medicine*, 10, 1976, 147-158.
- YOUNG A., "Order, Analogy and Efficacy in Ethiopian Medical Divination", *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, 1, 1977, 183-199.
- WEIL S., "An Elegy in Amharic on Dr. Faitlovitch", *Pe'amim*, 33, 1987, 125-127. (in Hebrew)
- WEIL S., "Wolleqa", in SIEGBERT U. (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Aethiopic*, Wiesbaden, 2010 (forthcoming).



Aleka Yaacov with Kessim



Aleka Yaacov

## THE TIME OF CIRCUMCISION IN THE *BETA ISRAEL* COMMUNITY

*Sharon Shalom, Department of Jewish Philosophy,  
Bar-Ilan University, Israel*

### **Introduction**

The *Torah* specifies on multiple occasions that a male infant born into the People of Israel must be circumcised on the eighth day after his birth. The injunction is first given to Abraham (Genesis 17:12): “And throughout the generations, every male among you shall be circumcised at the age of eight days.” Abraham did accordingly (Genesis 21:4): “And when his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God has commanded him.” The commandment is mentioned again in connection with the sacrifice offered by a woman who has given birth (Leviticus 12:3): “On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.”

In the *Beta Israel* community, opinion is divided about when circumcisions ought to be performed, according to my own fieldwork.<sup>1</sup> Some report that circumcisions took place on the seventh day, while others testify that it was on the eighth day from the birth of the child. The difference of opinion concerning the time of circumcision correlates to the geographical division of the *Beta Israel*. Those whom I interviewed who came from Amharic-speaking regions claimed that circumcision took place on the eighth day; and those from the Tigray region said that the circumcision was on the seventh day. While the *Beta Israel* were not aware of Rabbinic literature, they did have the

---

<sup>1</sup> See appendix.

Bible.<sup>2</sup> There, every mention of circumcision specifically refers to the eighth day. How is it then that, contrary to the *Torah*, the interviewees from Tigray testified that the circumcision took place on another day? Furthermore, what accounts for the difference in opinion among the *Beta Israel*?

Travelers and researchers have made records concerning the day of circumcision in *Beta Israel* communities. We shall begin with a survey of their testimonies and quickly discover several significant contradictions.

### Reports of Researchers and their Conclusions<sup>3</sup>

The time of circumcision among *Beta Israel* is first documented in the answers of Father Isaac<sup>4</sup> to the questions of Luzzato<sup>5</sup> who was brought to Father Isaac by the French researcher Antoine d'Abbadie in 1848:

The Covenant of circumcision was commanded to Abraham for the eighth day. But the law of the *Torah* adds that whoever is not circumcised by the eighth day is not part of the Israelite People. On the other hand, it is forbidden to shed blood on the Sabbath, and therefore the circumcision is on the seventh day, but on the eighth day if the preceding day was the Sabbath.<sup>6</sup>

In this answer five key features of the circumcision ritual are described: (1) Abraham was commanded to circumcise on the eighth day. (2) The law of the *Torah* determines that whoever was not circumcised before the eighth day was not a part of the People of Israel. (3) Circumcision

---

<sup>2</sup> Concerning the literature of *Beta Israel*, see KAPLAN, ERLICH, SALAMON 2003, 341-348.

<sup>3</sup> Some of this information can also be found in ZIV Yosi, "The date of circumcision in the custom of Beta Israel." (Unpublished ms.)

<sup>4</sup> Father Isaac was the head of the priests in a monastery which housed some twenty priests and monks who were at the centre of the *Beta Israel* community.

<sup>5</sup> Filosseno Luzzatto was the son of Rabbi Samuel David Luzzato (1800-1865). He devoted his short life to researching the *Beta Israel* community.

<sup>6</sup> ARCHIVES ISRAELITES (1851), 263.

is (reasonably enough) considered shedding blood by the *Beta Israel*, and as such is forbidden on the *Sabbath*. (4) *Beta Israel* circumcise on the seventh day. (5) If the seventh day falls on *Sabbath*, they circumcise on the next day, the eighth. From these observations questions naturally follow: If Abraham was commanded to circumcise on the eighth day, why do they usually circumcise on the seventh? Where is there any suggestion to circumcise before the eighth day? Is there an effort here to circumcise before the beginning of the eighth day (and so on the seventh day), or perhaps before the end of the eighth day?

Additional evidence is presented by the Orientalist Josef Halévy (1827-1917), who traveled to Ethiopia at the request of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*. Upon returning, he wrote an account of his journey, in which he testifies to the observance of circumcision by the Falashas: “Unlike other Jews, the Falashas perform the Covenant of Circumcision on the seventh day and not the eighth.”<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, the Christian missionary Flad<sup>8</sup> reported that “the Falashas circumcise all of their children on the eighth day unless it falls on the *Sabbath*, in which case it is put off until the night to avoid desecrating the *Sabbath*.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Leslau wrote, “Circumcision is on the eighth day. If the day of circumcision falls on *Sabbath*, they do it after sunset; in the past they would defer the circumcision to the ninth day.”<sup>10</sup>

Jacques Faitlovitch, a student of Josef Halévy, whose first journey into the Gondar area was in 1904, wrote: “The Falashas circumcise both sexes. With the males, they take great care about the date, which is at the beginning of the eighth day, that is, immediately on the conclusion of the seventh day. The circumcision is never performed on the *Sabbath*, since according to their belief, it is work.”<sup>11</sup>

This testimony places the circumcision in the twilight zone between the seventh and eighth days. We shall return to this notion that the evening of the seventh day was the beginning of the eighth. Faitlovitch’s

---

<sup>7</sup> HALÉVY 1869.

<sup>8</sup> ELIAV 1966, 62.

<sup>9</sup> FLAD 1869.

<sup>10</sup> WOLF 1951, xvi.

<sup>11</sup> FAITLOVITCH 1905, 27.

remark as well also mentions the topic of female circumcision; this topic cannot be treated in this discussion, but we will see it now as it enters the debate between Faitlovitch and Aaron Zeev Aešcoly.

Aešcoly wrote:

The males are circumcised on the seventh day after birth. If the seventh day fell on *Sabbath*, it was put off to the next day. A boy who was not circumcised on time was considered as uncircumcised and was not part of the Israelite People. It was accepted belief that a child who died uncircumcised after his eighth day does not go to heaven. The girls are circumcised on the eighth day or, if the eighth day was on Sabbath, on the ninth. (The clitoris of the outer vagina is cut.)<sup>12</sup>

To this, Faitlovitch responded at length and harshly:

I was astonished to read [in the article by Aescoly] things that are hanging in the air without any actual basis....Many of the laws and customs told us in the article are not at all actual among the Jews of Abyssinia....Therefore one must regard everything stated in the article with great caution. The Falashas, like all Jews, circumcise their children on the eighth day, not the seventh as stated in the article. Only when the eighth day falls on Sabbath do they circumcise on the preceding day. A pure Falasha boy who, for any reason, is not circumcised on time, is brought into the Jewish Covenant later; it is not as the author [Aescoly] testified, that the boy is not part of the People of Israel. The words of the author regarding the circumcision of girls are not true.<sup>13</sup>

Aešcoly responded by referring back to the account which Faitlovitch himself wrote upon returning from his first trip to Ethiopia (from which we quoted previously). Aešcoly takes the phrase "...at the beginning of the eighth day, that is, immediately at the end of the seventh day" to mean on the seventh day – and there is good reason to prefer Aešcoly's interpretation over Faitlovitch's as we shall see. He cited in addition the testimonies of d'Abbadie and Halévy which

---

<sup>12</sup> AEŠCOLY 1936 (a).

<sup>13</sup> J. FAITLOVITCH 1936, 373-374.



claim that circumcision was on the seventh day.<sup>14</sup> Regarding female circumcision, obviously Faitlovitch's remark that "the words of the author regarding the circumcision of girls are not true" applies at least as well to himself as it does to Aešcoly, for Faitlovitch himself wrote in his earlier account that "the Falashas circumcise both sexes."

Ziv has revealed the conflict of assumptions underlying the debate between Aešcoly and Faitlovitch:

This disagreement is quite characteristic of the different approaches of the opponents. Faitlovitch is working with Beta Israel from clearly Zionistic motivations. His goal was to make a connection between the Beta Israel Community and world Jewry and to work for their immigration to Israel. In a consistent manner, he encourages them to abandon those customs that are not practiced in the rest of the communities of Israel and to adopt the Rabbinical-religious way of life as accepted by world Jewry. The discontinuation of offering sacrifices as practiced by the [Beta Israel] community, abolition of the water of sin, and the adoption of the Star of David symbol, the prayer shawl, and the shofar – these are examples of Faitlovitch's activities. His reports, too, evidence a tendency to harmonize the customs of the [Beta Israel] community with Rabbinical custom. In this light, his opposition to the report on circumcision on the seventh day is well understood, and it appears that his intentions color his words – "At the start of the eighth day, that is immediately at the end of the seventh day." We clearly discern in his words the tendency to harmonize the customs of Beta Israel with the Rabbinical customs practiced by the Jewish People. Eshkol, in contrast, observed the customs of the community as a researcher, and not as an emissary of the "Jewish People," and he did not hesitate to point out the differences in relation to Rabbinic custom. On the contrary, it is especially in the differences in customs that he finds a fruitful ground for research, and he tries to focus on the reasons for the differences. The great advantage of Faitlovitch was his direct contact with the Community. In the years 1904-1914 he organized three expeditions to the villages of Habash and spent many months in their midst. His knowledge was drawn from what his eyes had seen and his ears had heard. Eshkol, on the other hand, never visited Ethiopia. He acquired all his knowledge by reading expedition journals and research. Overtones of scorn are evident throughout Faitlovitch's reaction to the

---

<sup>14</sup> AEŠCOLY 1936 (b), 181.

article of Aescoly the researcher, who never stepped out of his library.<sup>15</sup> Aescoly also objects to this assertion.<sup>16</sup>

In summary, all these authorities agree that the *Beta Israel* do not circumcise on *Sabbath*. According to Aescoly they circumcise on the seventh day, whereas according to Faitlovitch they circumcise on the eighth day (like the Jews who inherited the Rabbinical tradition), except when the eighth day is the *Sabbath*, in which case, they circumcise on the seventh day. So still we must ask, when did the *Beta Israel* perform circumcision? And furthermore, since the custom seems to differ from the commandment given to Abraham, what caused the change? Divergence from the Toraitic injunction is especially remarkable because the *Beta Israel* community has been characterized by its adherence to the simple meaning of the text.

In the opinion of Ziv, the primary cause of the change was the Book of Jubilees.<sup>17</sup> According to this text, circumcision after the eighth day does not change the uncircumcised to a member of the Covenant. He missed the deadline and his punishment is cutting off from his people:

It is a permanent law for all generations that the eighth day shall not pass without circumcision, for it is a permanent law written in the tablets of heaven. **Any child who will not be circumcised in the flesh of his soul before ('ad) the eighth day, he is not a member of the Covenant that The Lord made with Abraham.** Rather is he a member of devastation who does not have the sign, for it is of The Lord to be devastated and erased from the earth and to be cut off from the earth because he has breached the covenant of The Lord our God.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> In a footnote, Aescoly related that in an immigrant Absorption Center a small group of Ethiopian immigrants who had arrived in Israel during the 1930's approached him to help them be absorbed into Israel's work force. The Jewish Agency had turned to him because of his mastery of the immigrants' language. Aescoly took advantage of his ties with the new immigrants and learned about their customs from them. Thus Aescoly, too, had direct contact with the Ethiopian Jews, albeit much less than Faitlovitch. AEŠCOLY 1936 (b), 181, note A.

<sup>16</sup> ZIV Y., "The date of the custom of circumcision in Beta Israel." (Unpublished ms.)

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Jubilees 15: 25-26*, Jerusalem, Avraham Kahana edition, 1970.

This emphasis may have caused errors in some ancient translations of Genesis 17:14.<sup>19</sup> “And the uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken My covenant” was distorted with the addition of the words “on (*ba-*) the eighth day,” so that the verse read “And the uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin on the eighth day, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken My covenant.” Moreover, while in its context the last clause of the Biblical passage refers to the father whose duty it is to circumcise his child, i.e. if the father, the responsible party does not, then “he hath broken My covenant”; the Book of Jubilees encourages reading the subject of that clause in light of the condemnation, “he a member of devastation ... because he has breached the covenant of The Lord our God” thus making the infant the guilty.

This difficult passage in the Book of Jubilees, the theory goes, pushed the *Beta Israel* to move the circumcision earlier to the seventh day – safely before the eighth day. When the seventh day fell on *Sabbath*, however, they deferred the circumcision to Sunday, the eighth day. Thus they managed to both refrain from circumcision on *Sabbath* and from leaving the child uncircumcised after the eighth day.

---

19

GENESIS 17:14	JUBIL. 15:14	SAMARIAN	SEPTUAGINT	ORIT
The uncircumcised male who does not circum-cise the flesh of his foreskin	The uncircumcised of <i>all your</i> males who does not circumcise the flesh of his foreskin	The uncircumcised male who does not circum-cise the flesh of his foreskin	The uncircumcised male who does not circum-cise the flesh of his foreskin	<i>He who has not been circumcised in the end of his foreskin</i>
	<i>on the eighth day</i>	<i>on the eighth day</i>	<i>on the eighth day</i>	<i>on the eighth day</i>
That soul shall be cut off from its people, for he has broken My covenant.	That soul shall be cut off from its people, for he has broken My covenant.	That soul shall be cut off from its people, for he has broken My covenant.	That soul shall be cut off from its people, for he has broken My covenant.	That soul shall be cut off from its people, for he has broken My covenant.

From this emphasis on the words of Jubilees that one must not go past the eighth day from birth, the *Kehila* established the seventh day as the day of circumcision. When the seventh day from birth falls on Sabbath, they defer the circumcision to Sunday, which is the eighth day from birth. Thus, they refrained from circumcising on Sabbath and from passing the eighth day. Only when connections were made with European Jews and through them with the entire Jewish people, under their influence they gradually began to circumcise at the dawn of the eighth day (the end of the seventh). They continue to avoid circumcision on Sabbath. When the eighth day falls on Sabbath, they either circumcise early, on the seventh day (Faitlovitch) or defer to the ninth day (Leslau). The conflicting reports and the arguments among researchers reflect, in fact, the transition from the older custom of circumcision on the seventh day to the later custom of circumcision on the eighth day, and the deferral to the seventh or the ninth day (the eighth day after sunset.) only when the eighth day was on Sabbath.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, because the Book of Jubilees taught that circumcision should not take place after the eighth day, the *Beta Israel* established the seventh day as the day of circumcision; though in the exception case that the seventh day fell on the *Sabbath*, they postponed the circumcision until the following day, Sunday, the eighth day. It seems then that this custom was established by the *Beta Israel* sages as a harmonization of two conflicting texts, the Bible and the Book of Jubilees.

This hypothesis is difficult to accept for two reasons. First, this way of dealing with contradictory texts is not in keeping with the character of the sages of *Beta Israel*, their way of thinking, and their culture. Second, it is not reasonable to assume that circumcision on the seventh day reflects the ancient and original custom of the *Kehila* while the rest of the evidence about circumcision on the eighth day represents a later custom. It is unreasonable to think so since the sages of *Beta Israel* stayed close to the simple interpretation of the text. In any case, there is room to assume that in fact the early custom was to circumcise on the eighth day as specified by the canonical text, the Book of Genesis, and that circumcision on the seventh day was a later custom.

---

<sup>20</sup> ZIV Y., "The date of the custom of circumcision in Beta Israel." (Unpublished ms.)

We suggest, therefore, that the original custom of the *Beta Israel* was to circumcise on the eighth day, and at some later time in the history of the community, the performance of circumcision was transferred to the seventh day, at the end of the day, near sunset. It is possible that the Book of Jubilees brought about this change, but even more feasible is the change was instigated by the stringent observance among *Beta Israel* of the laws of purity and impurity.

### **Defilement and Purity in the Customs of *Beta Israel***<sup>21</sup>

One of the elements uniting the Ethiopian community is stringent observance of the laws of defilement and purification. The *Beta Israel* believed that defilement was forbidden, and so everyone forever avoided all kinds of defilement. Thus, for example, they avoided contact with the dead, with animal carcasses, and with menstruating women. For the same reason, they avoided touching non-Jews. A person who did become defiled, left his home until he was purified. If it was a light defilement, he waited until evening; then he performed ritual immersion and returned home. If the defilement was a heavy one, such as contact with a menstruating woman or the dead,<sup>22</sup> he was impure for seven days; only then did he immerse, become purified, and return home. While the *Torah* permits one who is impure to remain at home and have physical contact with his surroundings and only prohibits him from entering the Temple, the stringent regulation of impurity by the *Beta Israel* allowed the rest of the community to retain its purity.

Purification from all kinds of defilement included immersion in natural water. Immersion was practiced universally. All of the Jewish villages of Ethiopia were situated near streams, so ritual immersion

---

<sup>21</sup> See also, ZIV 1990; SHALUSH 1998.

<sup>22</sup> When someone died they tried to be sure that very few dealt with the corpse in order not to be defiled. Those who were defiled remained outside the village for seven days. On the third and seventh day, they were sprinkled with waters of the *minza* – ashes from a red cow mixed with spring water, and in the end they immersed themselves and were purified.

posed no special difficulty and no other solution had to be sought (in contrast with the Jewish communities of other regions).<sup>23</sup>

Women who received their menstrual periods, and were therefore defiled, dwelt in a special hut of impurity called *margam gojo* for all seven days. During those days, other people brought them food, placing it before the hut where she could collect it. Around each hut a circle of stones signified the area of impurity. This impurity was not embarrassing but was understood to be quite natural.

After the birth of a male child, the mother was impure for 40 days. During the first seven days, the impurity was severe and analogous to menstrual purity; accordingly she remained in the menstrual hut. At the end of that period, she immersed. On the eighth day the son was circumcised. After the circumcision, the mother and child moved into another hut, which as the first was designated for the periods of impurity but this hut for this period of lesser impurity. A woman who gave birth to a female child was impure for 80 days. For the first 14 days, the impurity was more severe. At the end of that period, she immersed and then moved to the second hut.

At the end of the period of forty or eighty days, the woman went to immerse, forty times for a son or eighty times for a daughter. At that time, the *qes* (priest) read from the *Arde'et* (Book of Students). Then he sprinkled her, the baby, and the home with purification water. The *qes* then lightly beat the woman with branches to arouse her to repentance, accompanying this with special prayers. She then brought a sacrifice according to her economic means, a goat, a bird, or bread and drinks to be consumed by the community.

### **The transition from the eighth to the seventh day**

As we have seen, on the seventh day after the birth of the child the mother went to immerse herself. The laws of childbirth established this ritual without connection to the commandment of circumcision.

---

<sup>23</sup> It is interesting to note that in the Second Temple era there was a large group of people called "friends" (*chaverim*) who also kept the laws of impurity. They were careful to undergo purification as soon as possible.

Her immersion marked her transition from intense impurity to light impurity.<sup>24</sup> This was both a moment of significance in her post-natal process and a convenient moment between her stay in one hut and another, in which the circumcision could easily be performed. It seems that they took advantage of this time to circumcise the child, on the seventh day near sunset, immediately following immersion. Thus the day of immersion became the day of circumcision.<sup>25</sup>

The placement of the circumcisions near sunset on the seventh day does not indicate an effort to make them close to the eighth day. The day of the *Beta Israel* did not even begin at sunset, as in the Rabbinic tradition, but rather at sunrise.<sup>26</sup> More importantly, however, we must emphasize that projection of a priori textual concerns onto what seems to have been a practical decision of timing misunderstands the cultural context in which the custom developed. The story of Eldad the

---

<sup>24</sup> Since she does not return to her home, but rather returns to the impurity hut as we have seen above

<sup>25</sup> A good proof of this is the testimony of Kahin Samuel Samai Naga and Father Malcolm Bahata: “The mother immerses on the eighth day of giving birth, and after she returns to the village from the river, they circumcise the infant.” Both interviewees were from the Tigray region, and nevertheless they say that the circumcision was on the eighth day, whereas others from the Tigray region stated that circumcision was on the seventh day. Kahin Samuel Samai Naga and Father Malcolm Bahata remember for sure that the immersion and the circumcision were close together. That is what leads me to claim that the day of immersion influenced the day of circumcision.

<sup>26</sup> Kahin (*Qes*) Matosnos of Kiryat Gat told me that the day begins at sunrise. In a discussion at an Ethiopian Synagogue in Kiryat Gat, most remembered that the day began in the morning and not from the night. On the other hand, some of the participants could not confirm this and insisted that the day in fact began from the night. In light of this I tend to think that the day began in the early morning, and what caused the confusion was the fact that in Ethiopia work stops at sunset. The reason for this is technical – it gets dark and there is no lighting (and not because the day begins in the morning). Incidentally, in Ethiopia the day officially begins at 18:00. As Elias writes, “Even the clock in Ethiopia is different. It differs by six hours from the international time. The day begins immediately after sunset (18:00 by our clock, 24:00 by theirs.) I always ask myself what the reason is that the day ends in the middle of the night. It is more reasonable that the day will change at sunset.” There is other evidence of this, but this is not the place to expand on this. We should mention that the day also began in the morning in the Temple.

Danite illustrates this point well. One reason for doubting his claimed relationship with *Beta Israel* is that

the laws (halachot) that Eldad the Danite brought with him were anchored directly or indirectly to the Rabbinical tradition. Their language is typically talmudic-halachic, though sometimes various details have been changed. The tradition of the Jews of Ethiopia, in contrast, almost completely lacks the Rabbinic tradition and their manner of teaching. The style and content of the laws brought by Eldad the Danite does not resemble even one of the texts of the [Beta Israel] Community...<sup>27</sup>

It is also worthy of note that in 1862 there was a dispute between the Christian missionaries and the Jews in Ethiopia. Their case was brought before King Theodorus.<sup>28</sup> The missionaries claimed that the sacrifices of the Jews of Ethiopia proved their lack of familiarity with the Biblical regulations regarding nazirites, since the *Torah* expressly forbids the offering of sacrifices outside of the Temple (Deuteronomy 12:14), which the rest of world Jewry accepted.<sup>29</sup> The king asked an explanation from the Ethiopian Jewish nazirites but they could not answer. The missionaries succeeded in their attempt to weaken the standing of the Jewish nazirites and priests by showing their lack of knowledge of scripture.<sup>30</sup> Explanations that paint the change of time for circumcision as a scholarly, text-based decision misrepresent the *Beta Israel* community; they are Rabbinically-biased and ignore important facts.

---

<sup>27</sup> WALDMAN 1989, 17-30.

<sup>28</sup> BEN DOR 1994.

<sup>29</sup> The taboo of sacrificing outside the chosen place is the accepted explanation whose origin is with the Talmudic sages. There are, however, other interpretations that do not go along with the taboo of sacrifices outside the chosen place.

<sup>30</sup> BEN DOR 1994, note 41. This may be caused by lack of knowledge, but that is merely a symptom. The true reason is that it is a result of a cultural outlook. I believe that the Ashkenazi sages asked questions, answered the questions that bothered them, while the Sephardic sages saw no need to question and to ask, and vice versa. Therefore we learn that an important part of our world derives from a subjective place, where the environment and culture are central factors in fashioning the cogitative and spiritual character of each Jewish society.



Over some probably long period of time, and without reference to texts, the circumcision ritual migrated to the seventh day after the mother's immersion. In the special world of the *Beta Israel*, there were no norms and decrees with the rigidity of *halakhah* as practiced throughout the Jewish world as molded by the talmudic tradition.<sup>31</sup>

### **Differences between the Tigray and Amharic Regions**

Most of the interviewees from Amhara stated that circumcision was on the eighth day, while those from Tigray said that it took place on the seventh day. In my opinion, contact with European Jews accounts for the difference.

When the Jews of Europe and the Jews of Ethiopia re-established contact, the Amharic Jews of central Ethiopia were more involved than the Jews in the northern Tigray and other regions.<sup>32</sup> So, through European influence, circumcision in Amharic-speaking regions moved from the seventh day to the eighth day at sunrise. It is this transition that the conflicting reports and arguments among the researchers reflect.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

My interviews with elders among the *Beta Israel* reveal there is no single definitive answer on the day of the circumcision. Some remember that circumcision took place on the eighth day, and some

---

<sup>31</sup> There are probably several reasons for this – lack of knowledge, cultural influence, and tradition; in any event the point is their world is different and unorganized.

<sup>32</sup> Hezy Ovadia reported that he was told the following: “Dr. Faitlovitch knew primarily the Gondar area, in which the Amharic Jews are concentrated. Naturally, the assistants to Dr. Yaakov Faitlovitch were local Jews who acted as go-betweens and eventually became leaders of the community and were dominant figures with great influence. This brought about the fact most of the help and sustenance that came from abroad came to this region. Only rarely did the assistance come to the remote places such as Tigray. They did not try to find a solution to the problem. Even worse, in one of the meetings in Israel they claimed that there were no more Jews in Tigray.”

testified that it was on the seventh. The same ambiguity prevailed in the testimony of travelers and researchers.

We rejected previous explanations of the circumcision timing because they misrepresent the Jewish community in Ethiopia, and we offered the following explanation of the timing of the custom and the confusion in the accounts: the original custom of the *Beta Israel* was to circumcise as commanded in Genesis on the eighth day. Observance of the ritual purity laws, however, generated an incentive to circumcise on the seventh day, and so the ritual shifted to the seventh day. The move was not the result of a calculated decision and Rabbinic-style decree. The conflicting reports and arguments among the researchers reflect a transition, primarily effected among the Jews of Amhara through their contact with European Jewry, from circumcision on the seventh day to circumcision on the eighth day. That is to say, there were three periods: the first in which the practice of the *Beta Israel* accorded with the injunction given to Abraham to circumcise on the eighth day, the second in which circumcision was practiced on the seventh day, and the third in which there was a partial return by the *Beta Israel* to circumcision on the eighth day.

Through this study of the circumcision customs we have seen that the literary and cultural world of *Beta Israel* was not an organized, legalistic tradition. Ethiopian Jewry's ritual practices differed sharply from the Rabbinic tradition. Relative to the Rabbinical world-view, it seems that the transition from circumcision on the eighth day to the seventh day "just happened," unmotivated by text, and if in response to anything, then simply to the rhythm of life generated by the purification rituals.

## Appendix

	NAME OF INTERVIEWEE	REGION OF ETHIOPIA	DAY OF CIRCUMCISION	REASON FOR CUSTOM
1	Yosef David	Amhara	Eighth day only	As written in the Torah
2	Teku Rashto	Tigray	Seventh Day	When she returns from the river.
3	Rachel Gesisag Laylai	Tigray	Eighth day, but under certain conditions on the seventh day after immersion.	
4	Kahin Matusnot Manasseh	Priest from Gondar region	We do the circumcision on the eighth day, not the seventh.	As written in the Torah
5	Sara Maharat	Tigray woman	The circumcision was on the seventh day before the stars appeared.	Because it is connected to immersion in the river
6	Kahin Shmuel Samai Naga <sup>33</sup>	Tigray priest	The mother immerses on the eighth day. When she returns from the river, the infant is circumcised.	
7	Abba Malcolm Bahata	Davgona, Tigray	The mother immersed on the eighth day. When she returns from the river the infant is circumcised.	
8	Hezy Ovidia	Born in Ethiopia of Yemenite background.	The circumcision is on the eighth day.	Hazay Ovidia heard of circumcision on the seventh day but prefers and chooses to testify that the circumcision is on the eighth day

<sup>33</sup> Kahin Shmuel Samai Naga passed away one month after this interview.

## Bibliography

- AEŠCOLY A. Z., “Halacha and Customs among the Abyssinian Jews (the Falachas) in the light of Rabbinic and Caraitic Halacha (conclusion)”, *Tarbiz*, 7, 2, 1936 (a), 121-134. (in Hebrew)
- AEŠCOLY A. Z., “Rejoinder (to p.373-379)”, *Tarbiz*, 7, 3-4, 1936 (b), 380-387. (in Hebrew)
- BENDOR S., “The connections of the Jews of Ethiopia with King Theodorus”, *Pe’amim*, 58, 1994, 67-85. (in Hebrew)
- ELIAV M., “The awakening of European Jewry to the aid of the Falashas”, *Tarbiz*, 35, 1966, 61-76. (in Hebrew)
- FAITLOVITCH J., *Notes d’un voyage chez les Falashas*, Paris, Leroux, 1905.
- FAITLOVITCH J., “The supposed Halacha of the Falashas”, *Tarbiz*, 7, 3-4, 1936, 373-379. (in Hebrew)
- FLAD J.M., *The Falashas (Jews) of Abyssinia*, London, 1869.
- HALÉVI J., *Excursion chez les Falashas*, Paris, 1869.
- KAPLAN S., ERLICH H., SALAMON H., *Ethiopia, Christianity, Islam and Judaism*, 2003. (in Hebrew)
- LANE E.W., *Arabian Society in the Middle Ages: Studies from the Thousand and One Nights*, London, 1883.
- LANE E.W., *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians (Introduced by M. Saad el-Din)*, London, 1954.
- SHALUSH D., *The dispersed of Israel will enter on the Jews of Habash*, Tel Aviv, 1998.
- WALDMAN M., *Beyond the Rivers of Ethiopia*, Tel Aviv, 1989. (in Hebrew)
- WOLF L., *Falasha Anthology*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1951.
- ZIV Y., “Defilement and purification in the Ethiopian community”, A thesis for his Master Degree at Bar-Ilan University, 1990.
- ZIV Y., “The date of the custom of circumcision in Beta Yisrael”, unpublished ms.

THE PERFORMANCE PRACTICE  
IN *BETA ISRAEL* PRAYERS – A SERVICE FOR THE  
NEW MOON (*YA-CARAQÂ BA'ÂL*): A CASE STUDY

*Ron Atar, Bar-Ilan University, Israel*

## Introduction

This paper attempts to analyze the main performance characteristics of *Beta Israel* priests. The analysis is based mainly on Margaret Hayon's recordings of *ya-Caraqâ Ba'âl* ceremony, which took place one morning of January 1994 at Nave Carmel caravan site near Haifa. The ceremony was performed by *Qes* Biyadgeley Baynasay, *Qes* Buruk Elias and *Qes* Molla Alamu.<sup>1</sup> All the three came to Israel with Operation Solomon (1991), and were living in a caravan site at the time of the recording.

The main characteristics of *Beta Israel* prayers have already been discussed in several articles. These articles focus on the formal musical structures of the prayers – which are strongly connected to their system of performance modes – and on the tight connection between the formal organization of the liturgical text and the distribution of the melodic material between the performers.<sup>2</sup> Two more aspects that are frequently and systematically discussed in existing research are the similarities between the Ethiopian Christian and *Beta Israel* religious traditions and liturgical practices, and the prayer texts in the context of the liturgical cycle as a whole.<sup>3</sup> Hayon's 1999 article

---

<sup>1</sup> *Qes* Biyadgeley Baynasay and *Qes* Buruk Elias, both from Semian-Melata; and *Qes* Molla Alamu, from Gojjam.

<sup>2</sup> AROM and TOURNY 1999; TOURNY 2001.

<sup>3</sup> KAUFMAN 1989.

“Beta Israel Prayers – Oral and Written Traditions: Analysis of a Service for the New Moon”<sup>4</sup> attempts to consider this prayer from a comparative viewpoint: in particular, a comparison between a transcript of this recording and other published texts of this prayer, including the transcript of sections of this prayer in various sources such as *Kahan Mashaf* (the main prayers book of *Beta Israel* liturgy); Aešcoly’s *Recueil de texts Falashas* and Halévy’s *Nouvelles Prières*.<sup>5</sup> In her article, the author mentions the importance of considering text and music together in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of *Beta Israel* liturgical music and practices. She indicates that, as a linguist, her research necessarily is confined to the text of the prayer and almost completely neglects its musical aspects.<sup>6</sup> In this article, I attempt to complement Hayon’s article by concentrating on the prayer’s musical aspects. However, this article will not focus on the prayer’s musical structural aspects but on a non-habitual phase – the musical aesthetics of the prayer. These aspects are strongly connected to the performance practice of the performers of the prayers – the priests (*qesoch*).

The aesthetic aspects of *Beta Israel* prayers have never been studied comprehensively. But before we precede with a detailed examination of the *Beta Israel* priests’ performance practices, it is important to note that their religious training process was long and demanding, especially from the musical aspect. *Beta Israel* priests, as the main keepers and transmitters of their religious heritage and liturgy, used to study with monks (*manakosat*) over a period of about seven to ten years in their youth. They were taught, isolated, in monasteries that later became pilgrimage destinations of *Beta Israel*.<sup>7</sup> In the course of the 1970’s, the tradition of monasteries disappeared and the role of the *manakosat* was taken by the *qesoch*.

The learning process of the young apprentices (*dyaqon*) consists not only of memorizing the written laws of the Bible and their realizations to every day life of *Beta Israel* community, but also in observing

---

<sup>4</sup> HAYON 1999.

<sup>5</sup> AEŠCOLY 1951; HALÉVY 1877.

<sup>6</sup> HAYON 1999.

<sup>7</sup> KAUFMAN 1989, 79.

the service and listening to it; indeed, the study of the service was a crucial part of their training. Although the service includes spoken recitations (such as benedictions and sermon), it consists primarily sung prayers. The trainees were taught the immense number of prayers of *Beta Israel* liturgy – whose main services took place at night or early morning hours – by heart. The learning process was accomplished through listening to the services and memorizing the prayers and their order. It is obvious that, in order to control the complex musical-textual structures of the prayers and their quantity, the priests needed to develop special musical qualifications, such as exceptional musical memory and absorption ability of huge amount of prayers. Upon completing his study, and provided that he was married and passed an examination, the *dyaqon* was officially declared to be *qes* at an induction ceremony called *sriet*.<sup>8</sup>

The congregation and the other priests judged a priest at the end of his studies not only according to his adherence to demands of their religious heritage (such as *Beta Israel*'s strict norms on purity and impurity), but also according his musical abilities and talent. Priests who demonstrated their mastery of the *zema* (the melody of the holy words of the prayers) and sung the *qalocc* (the holy text of the prayers) with accuracy, or with pleasant voices, were likely to enhance their prestige, both in the congregation, and among their fellow priests, especially during the *Beta Israel* holyday convergences. Such is the case of *Qes Imharen* (*Qes Yermiyau Pikado*) from Semien-Manata, who currently lives in Upper Nazareth (Northern Israel). *Qes Imharen* holds some duties at the religious council of the city, and presided over the burial ceremony and the prayers during the seven days of mourning of *Beta Israel* congregation in his town and at provincial towns. However, his refined voice, good intonation and comprehensive familiarity with the *zema* (the melodies of the prayers) gave him high status among *Beta Israel qesoch*. His musical abilities especially prominent during the prayers encounters of the *qesoch*. *Qes Imharen* used to interrupt other *qesoch*, correct the *zema* and even demonstrate it by himself, while the other *qesoch* listened and followed to his orders.

---

<sup>8</sup> TREVISAN SEMI 1987.

*Qes* Imharen was also well known as musical instructor of groups of youngsters approach *Beta Israel* who were born in Israel and showed interest in their religious heritage, and especially in the prayers.

*Beta Israel* services are held in two different ways. During week days, the *qes* usually presents the service by himself, in front of his congregation. However, on annual holydays, the *qesoch* gather together in order to maintain a festive service. The main annual holydays are: *Barhan Saraqa* – the first day of the year; *Astareyo* – Day of Atonement; *Ba'ala masallat* – the feast of Tabernacle (parallel to the Jewish *Sukkot*); and *Fasika* – derived from the Hebrew name *Pesach* and celebrating the exodus of Israelites from Egypt. The priests also gather at weddings, funerals, day of *Seged* (*Beta Israel* pilgrimage festival and partial fast day), and at the day of new moon – *ya-Caraqâ Ba'âl*. In *ya-Caraqâ Ba'âl* ceremony, as in the other annual holydays, all parts of the service are performed by the *qesoch*. The rest of the congregation does not partake in the performance; they only listen to it, as passive recipients. Their role is limited to responding *Amen*, *Hallelujah* or *Maharee* (mercy) in fixed places in the prayers.

*Beta Israel* used to mark the first day of the month – *ya-Caraqâ Ba'âl* – in the manner of pre-Talmudic Judaism: this was a happy, festive day of rest. *Ya-Caraqâ Ba'âl* ceremony consist evening prayers and morning prayers. However, according Hayon, both of these prayers are internally divided into two separate parts. There are some parallel sections along the whole prayer. Common to all four parts (with variations) is the prayer *yetbâarak*;<sup>9</sup> the opening sections of the first and the third parts have the same opening words – *ba'elata sarq yetbâarak semu* (on the day of the New Moon, His name be praised), which belong specifically to the New Moon. However, the continuation in each section is different. According to Shelemay,<sup>10</sup> this is the initial prayer for all annual holiday morning rituals. The

<sup>9</sup> *Yetbarak* (blessed) or an abbreviated *yetbarak* occurs before and after important prayers, mostly at the morning rituals but also at the evening office in different version. There are several *yetbaraks* in *Beta Israel* liturgy. They can be differentiated by textual content, liturgical function and melody (*zema*). See KAUFMAN 1989, 113.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.



third parallel section – *me'râf* – appears to be a shortened version of *Qeddus* (corresponding to the Jewish *kedusha* and the Christian *trisagion*). This blessing is presented in the first and the second parts of the evening prayer, paralleled conceptually but using different words and durations. After the end of the ceremony (i.e., the end of the morning prayers), the congregation used to have a solemn meal, during which the priest delivered a sermon and a faith lesson. The first day of *Nisan* (the first month of the year at the pre-Talmudic calendar) is considered to be the most important and festive *ya-Caraqâ Ba'âl* ceremony of the year.

The prayers enjoy a special status in *Beta Israel* sacred literature. They are considered the most original composition within it, believed to have been formulated in the middle of the fifteenth century by *Beta Israel* monks (*manakosat*),<sup>11</sup> whereas the origin of most of *Beta Israel* sacred books is not unambiguous.

With the occasional exception, most of the remaining *Beta Israel* books currently known to us entered the canon through Christian channels and were edited in the process, sometimes imperfectly, for *Beta Israel* use. Debate continues concerning the detailed provenance of some texts, such as the *Arde'et*, the *Apocalypse of Gorgoryos*, and *Abba Elyas*, and in its final format the *Te'ezazä Sänbät* is almost certainly a *Beta Israel* composition, though in part dependent on the Christian *Dersanä Sänbät*.<sup>12</sup>

These findings leave the prayers as the only liturgical material that can be classified as an original *Beta Israel* composition. Furthermore, having large number of prayers within the liturgy which are transmitted orally from generation to generation of *qesoch* and the ever changing way of performing these prayers, make it reasonable to assume that the composition of the prayers is still in progress. Nevertheless, the *qesoch's* performance practice is connected, not only with this process of continuous change, but also with the special distribution of the melodic material between the performers of the

---

<sup>11</sup> KAPLAN 1990; QUIRIN 1992.

<sup>12</sup> APPELYARD 1995, 103.

prayer. Margaret Hayon's remarkable recordings of *ya-Caraqâ Ba'âl* ceremony provides us with exceptional insights into this aesthetics of this liturgical heritage. These recordings and others will be discussed in details while focusing on the performance practice of *Beta Israel* priests.

## Analysis

Consideration of the systematic analysis of the performance practice documented in this recording implies the use of musical transcription. Transcription is the first step in musical analysis. It is a graphic reduction of sound phenomena. Objective musical transcription does not exist, but as we consider it, its first goal is to provide the most concise and comprehensive description possible of the musical materials under examination. In comparative studies of *Beta Israel* liturgy, such as Olivier Tourny's,<sup>13</sup> paradigmatic notation type has been employed as the best way to observe and present the findings. Moreover, the homogeneity and integrity of this musical tradition, the recurrence of many similar melodic phrases in many different pieces, and the many segments of text and music that recur in a variety of combinations, make paradigmatic notation the natural choice. However, it is obvious that music as a whole consists of many contrasting elements, each of which can be examined separately and with different means. In this study, I have chosen to examine separate phenomena's in the *Beta Israel's qesoch's* performance, and present them in transcription according to their specific requirements and idiosyncrasies. These phenomenas represent varied and general aspects of the *qesoch* performance practice: sonic aspect, rhythmic aspect, social aspect and structural aspect.

---

<sup>13</sup> TOURNY 1997.

## Sonic Aspect

In *Beta Israel* services, the prayers are systematically governed by the principle of antiphonal alternation between one *qes* and a group of *qesoch* who act as a responding group which I call – for the purposes of this paper – a choir. This system gives the member of the choir two possibilities: to repeat the priest's solo statement, or to respond with a short melodic formula that completes the soloist's musical phrase. In other words, the musical-textual structures of the prayers may be antiphonal or responsorial. This binary alternation, which governs the realization of the prayers, is a principle shared by many liturgical traditions; such regular oscillation between a soloist and choir is probably among most archaic techniques in religious traditions. However, in *Beta Israel* prayers the combinations of the binary structures receives a special significant which I'll discuss further at the social aspect analysis of this *ya-Caraqâ Ba'âl* ceremony.

In my discussion of the Sonic Aspect, I refer mainly to the role of the choir of *qesoch* in multi-part sections of the prayer. The texture in these parts of the prayer can be clearly defined as heterophony, which means that every member of the responding choir has his own variant of the group's shared melodic contour. This phenomenon can be connected to the heterogeneousness of skill, of training and even of the geographical origins among the group of (who function as choir), but this is primarily a clear sign of awareness and desire for musical differentiation of the individuals among the group. However, within this heterophony texture, it is striking to observe two unique sonic phenomena which systematically reappear throughout this recording of the prayer: overlapping cover and quasi-intentional polyphony.

“Overlapping cover” means a momentary overlapping between the two main performing entities of the prayer – the *qes* and the group of *qesoch*. In this case, the individual *qes* prolongs the last note of his phrase into the *qesoch* section, while a new melodic line starts above or below that prolonged note. Sometimes, even after the individual *qes* finishes holding this note, we still hear the sound resonance of this note, until this actual note appears again later in this section, sometimes as its tonus finalis (the last note).

*Ex. no. 1: Overlapping between the soloist and the group (Ba'elata sarq)*

The image displays two staves of musical notation in treble clef, illustrating overlapping vocal lines. The first staff, labeled 'First ges', contains the lyrics 'yet - ba - rach se - mo - - - - - le - gzia vic - re.' The second staff, labeled 'Second ges', contains the lyrics 'yet - ga - dat she - mo - le - gze vi - c - re'. A rectangular box highlights the overlapping section where the 'Second ges' line begins while the 'First ges' line continues. Within this box, the 'Second ges' line has the lyrics 'yet - ba - rach se - mo - le - gzia - - - - - vi - c - er - -'.

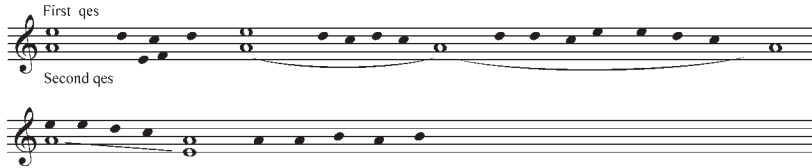
The second sonic phenomenon, as noted, is quasi-intentional-polyphony. There are indications of organized multi-vocal formulas in the *qesoch* sections.<sup>14</sup> Although these sections are primarily heterophonic, some of the individual melodic lines within them are sung together in a manner that clearly reflects pre-planned intention. It is not just the ambition to create individual melodic lines within groups of singers that stand out from this practice, but also some clues to multivocal organized texture that defined the performance of the *qesoch* sections.

The *Qeddu*s section from the *ya-Caraqâ Ba'âl* ceremony –sung, as mentioned above, at both sections of the evening part of the prayer, paralleled in idea but with different words – presents the typical structure of *Beta Israel* liturgy. In this structure, every verse of the prayer is musically performed as a series of three exchanges between the soloist and the group of *qesoch* set, against a two-part melodic arrangement. Hints of an organized multi-vocal texture clearly appear within the group of *qesoch* in this prayer. This motion starts in unison (which means one unified line of the *qesoch*) and then opens into two kinds of parallel motion, as shown in the following example. The lower voice (the second *qes*) changes his singing technique. He starts and ends his parallel motion towards the higher voice (the first *qes*) mainly on the fourth or fifth interval (or somewhere in between them). In between, he sings one long, continuous note which M. Huglo called

<sup>14</sup> TOURNY 2001, 6.

*recto tono* (organ point) – considering this multi-part technique of singing as the beginning of polyphony.<sup>15</sup>

Ex. no. 2: multi vocal motion (*qedma bahetiteka* from *qeddus*)



I believe that *Beta Israel* multi-vocal texture present an embryonic stage in the transition between heterophonic and polyphonic textures. However, it is important to note that the relative precision in the cantillation of the prayer in the choir of *qesoch* sections contributes to this observation. In other words, the apparently spontaneous responses of the choir nevertheless contain some organized multi-vocal characteristics.

## Rhythmic Aspect

The two main instruments used in the *Beta Israel* liturgy are the *Nagarit* – a barrel-shaped drum, consisting of a cow or goat skin stretched on the circular frame and struck with the hand – and the *Qachel* (or *metqe*): a plate-like gong of varying diameter, struck with a small metal rod. The use of these instruments is forbidden during *Sabbath* and *Astasreyo* (Day of Atonement) but acceptable during the main *Beta Israel* holidays; fast days such as the *seged*; and during *ya-Caraqâ Ba'âl* ceremony. Although instrumental accompaniment is not necessary for the performance of the prayers, their use definitely diversifies its rhythmic aspects.

<sup>15</sup> HUGLO 1993.

The use of instruments in this prayer has three main functions:

- a. ornamental function;
- b. measured function (regular rhythmic pattern; regular beats);
- c. a large range of intermediary possibilities between the two functions.

In the first function, the appearance of the beats of the *Nagarit* is not subjected to any systematic order. There is no definite rhythmic systematization in the location of the beats, and it is clear that the *Nagarit* functions here as an improvisatory decorative accompaniment to the psalmodic singing style. In any case, the instrument has no influence on the music, and its function is purely ceremonial.

To the measured function belong the flexible five quavers rhythmic pattern and the regular beats that accompany some sections of the prayer.<sup>16</sup> The five quavers obstinate rhythmic pattern is played on both the *Nagarit* and the *Qachel*, while the regular beats accompaniment is played solely on the *Nagarit* or the *Qachel*. In this five quavers rhythmic pattern, only the first eight out of the five quavers rhythmic pattern are struck by both instruments together. This first beat appears on the second or third syllable of the word. This phenomenon creates an upbeat of one or two quavers (see the empty area between the full line and the striped line in ex. no 3). The entire rhythmic pattern is realized only by the *Qachel*, which play on the third and the fourth quavers of the pattern.

*Ex. no. 3: five quavers rhythmic pattern*



It is important to note that, according the *qesoch*, the simultaneous use of the *Nagarit* and the *Qachel* at the five quavers rhythmic pattern assumes a symbolic dimension: a connection with the Earth

<sup>16</sup> ATAR 2005, 163.

(through the skin and the wood of the drum) and Heaven (through the supernatural vibration of the metal gong).

To conclude our discussion of this aspect, this prayer is continuously accompanied (in this recording, only by the *Nagarit*) – even during the four *yetbârak zegabra* recited blessings – with measured, quasi-measured or ornamental beats. This change from free-ornamental beats parts of the prayer into clear-cut measured parts and then back to free style beats and so on, enhances the richness and variety of the prayer, adding a dimension which would be completely absent without the use of the instruments. This example presents the change from the free ornamental rhythmic style (at the choir part) into regular rhythmic style (at the solo part).

*Ex. no. 4: Change from free-ornamental style of beats into regular beats style*  
*Anta Amlek bahetitaka and Bahetitu qeddus*

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff is labeled 'choir' and the bottom staff is labeled 'solo'. Both staves use a treble clef and a common time signature. The notation consists of a sequence of notes and rests, with various rhythmic markings above the notes, including 'x' marks and downward-pointing arrows. The 'choir' part starts with a free-ornamental style, indicated by irregular spacing and markings, and transitions to a regular rhythmic style. The 'solo' part starts with a regular rhythmic style, indicated by regular spacing and markings, and transitions back to a free-ornamental style.

## Social Aspect – Status, Respect and Equality

As I mention in relation to the first aspect (the sonic aspect), *Beta Israel* prayers are most unique in their formal organization, which comprises number of combinations of relationships between the two performing entities – the soloist *qes* and the group of *qesoch*. The most sophisticated method of organization is the one in which the textual verses are distributed between two similar melodic phrases through three alterations between the soloist *qes* and the group of *qesoch*. Tourny named this structure hemiolic structure.

This appellation is inspired by the rhythmic hemiola, in particular in the Renaissance and in the Baroque, which consisted of playing in 3/4 meter what was written in 6/8 (and vice-versa). Applied to a formal concept, it

can be described as a binary alternation between the soloist and the choir and a ternary distribution of the melodic material. Put differently, to three alternations correspond two reiterations of the same melodic material.<sup>17</sup>

This organization clearly appears at the first *Zegevre* part of the ceremony.

Table no. 1

Performing entities	One <i>qes</i>	Group of <i>qesoch</i>	One <i>qes</i>	Group of <i>qesoch</i>	One <i>qes</i>	Group of <i>qesoch</i>
	(1)1	2	(2)1	2	(3)1	2
Distribution of the melodic phrases	A	B	C	A	B	C
	(1)			(2)		

In my view, this structure expresses the equality among the performing. As presented at table 1, the group of *qesoch* is always singing the soloist *qes* unit; conversely, the soloist *qes* always sings the group of *qesoch* unit. Consequently, within this structure, all the performers are equal: the soloist and the group are placed on the same level of importance. Nevertheless, listening to the recording reveals a consistent phenomenon: the group of *qesoch* never starts their unit before the individual *qes* has completely finished his unit. It is as if they are waiting for the *qes* to completely finish his singing part – and only then do they continue to move on with the prayer. One might assume that this performance practice is an almost indiscernible expression of respect by the group of *qesoch* to the soloist *qes*, even within a completely equalitarian (or egalitarian) formation: the soloist *qes* is treated, in practice, as a “first among equals”.

---

<sup>17</sup> TOURNY 2001, 5.



## Structural Aspect

The characteristic alternations within the musical-textual structures of the prayer, and their internal complexities, are the most outstanding aspect of *Beta Israel* liturgy. Moreover, Hayon's recording highlights the assumption that in a few sections of the prayer, these alternations are articulated by the exchanges between the soloist *qes* and choir of *qesoch* or, to be precise, according to the alternation of the voice tone of the soloist *qes*. In other words, the complexity of the interchange of structures during the prayer can also be interpreted according to the alternation between the leading performers, and not merely from a theoretical-analytic standpoint.

## Conclusion

This new analysis, according to the performance practice of the priests, provides us with new insights concerning *Beta Israel* prayer, and widens our horizons. None of the four aspects which I surveyed here can stand independently by itself, but together they give us an extensive view of *Beta Israel* method of praying. Furthermore, particularly aspects point out unpredictable topics, which would have remained hidden from our view without this special analytic approach to the study of the prayers. For instance, the performance practices of the alternations between the soloist and the choir sheds new light on the complexity of the prayer's structure. Furthermore, the changes between the instrumental rhythmic genres accompaniments along the prayer enrich it with new dimension.

## Bibliography

- AEŠCOLY A. Z., *Recueil de texts falachas*, Paris, Institute d'ethnologie, Université de Paris, 1951.
- APPLEYARD D.L., "The Beta Israel (Falasha) Names For God in Agaw Prayer Texts", in KAPLAN S., *Between Africa and Zion*, Jerusalem, Ben-Zvi Institute, 1995, 103-112.
- AROM S. and TOURNY O., "The Formal Organization of the Beta Israel Liturgy-Substance and Performance", in PARFITT T. and TREVISAN SEMI E. (eds.), *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel*, Richmond, Surrey, Curzon Press, 1999, 252-256.
- ATAR R., "The Function of Musical Instruments in the Liturgy of the Ethiopian Jews", in PARFITT T. and TREVISAN SEMI E. (eds.), *Jews of Ethiopia. The birth of an elite*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2005, 155-172.
- HALÉVY J., *Prières des Falashas ou Juifs d'Abyssinie*, Paris, Baer J., 1877.
- HAYON M., "Oral and Written Traditions-Analysis of a Service for the New Moon", in PARFITT T. and TREVISAN SEMI E. (eds.), *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel*, Richmond, Surrey, Curzon Press, 1999, 209-234.
- HUGLO M., "Organum décrit, organum prescript, organum proscrit, organum écrit", in MEYER C. (ed.), *Polyphonies de tradition orale: histoire et traditions vivantes, Actes du Colloque de Royaumont 1990*, Paris, Rencontres à Royaumont, 1993.
- KAPLAN S., "The Literature of Beta Israel: Retrospect and Prospect", *Pe'amim*, 41, 1990, 90-111.
- KAUFMAN S. K., *Music, Ritual and Falasha History*, East Lansing, Michigan, Michigan State University Press, 1989.
- QUIRIN J., *The Evolution of the Ethiopian Jews: A History of the Beta Israel (Falasha) to 1920*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992.
- TOURNY O., *Systématique de la musique des Juifs d'ethiopie*, Thèse de Doctorat, Paris, École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (ehess), 1997.
- TOURNY O., "The Liturgical Musical Heritage of the Jewish Ethiopian Tradition", *IMI News*, 1, 2001, 2-8.
- TREVISAN SEMI E., "Le sriet: un rite d'investiture sacerdotale chez les Beta Israel (Falashas)", *Revue des études juives*, 146, 1-2, 1987, 101-124.

MIKAEL ARAGAWI:  
CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY AMONG THE *BETA ISRAEL*<sup>1</sup>

*Shalva Weil, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel*

## **Introduction**

In this paper, I shall discuss one particular missionary among the *Beta Israel*, who may have had the greatest impact of all missionaries on this population. Mikael Aragawi (1848-1931), unlike most other native agents among the *Beta Israel*, was of Christian and not *Beta Israel* origin, and due to his unrelenting efforts, large numbers of *Beta Israel* converted to Christianity. Their descendants are included in the category today designated *Felesmura*, who have been immigrating to Israel since the 1990's. In an ironic twist of history, hundreds of Aragawi's descendants have also migrated to the State of Israel under the Law of Return, since Mikael Aragawi himself, as well as his missionary son Menker, married Falasha wives, who converted to Christianity. In Israel, Jewish descent is decided matrilineally and therefore Aragawi's descendants are eligible to become Israeli citizens in the Jewish homeland.

---

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Ato Tezera Shiferaw, a great-grandson of Mikael Aragawi resident in Israel, who helped me gather some of the information in this paper. Tezera is the son of Kiede Shiferaw, a Falasha Christian from Chilga, and Yenealem, an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian from Wollegga.

## Missionaries in Ethiopia

Missionary activity in Ethiopia can be traced to the Portuguese global expansion and the establishment of a Jesuit mission in Ethiopia. This paper will focus upon one of the missionaries, who was a crucial cog in the missionary wheel during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

There is extensive literature on missionary activity in Ethiopia. The foreign missionaries came from a variety of European countries, including Germany, England and Sweden, and they "...must be viewed against the background of the rise of the modern missionary movement and of colonialism."<sup>2</sup> Their proliferation can be attributed to the interests of some Ethiopian rulers in Europe, and particularly the need to acquire firearms from the West to wage local wars. The attitude of different Ethiopian rulers changed. Tewodros II at first tolerated the missionaries, but later changed his mind and imprisoned them. This affair ended in Tewodoros' suicide in 1868. Yohannas IV (1871-1889) of Tigray province attempted to eradicate the missions with a view to establishing doctrinal unity within the Orthodox Church; he was particularly preoccupied with the Catholics in the north.<sup>3</sup> Under Menelik II (1889-1913), the mission returned. During the twentieth century, the Emperor Haile Selassie tolerated the European missionaries on condition that they would proselytize among non-Christian groups.

In all cases, the missionaries trained local Ethiopians, known as "native agents", who could carry on their work, particularly during the periods that they were expelled from Ethiopia and worked from abroad.

## Missionaries among the *Beta Israel*

The *Beta Israel* (Falashas)<sup>4</sup> were a common target for all the missionaries, both because of their lowly status in Ethiopia and because of the belief that by converting members of the "Chosen People" wherever

---

<sup>2</sup> CRUMMEY and KAPLAN 2007, 979.

<sup>3</sup> QUIRIN 1991, 174-175.

<sup>4</sup> On the different designations of the *Beta Israel*/Falashas/Ethiopian Jews, see WEIL 1995.

they be, the Christians could hasten the Redemption. In addition, the missionaries hoped that by proselytizing among the *Beta Israel*, they could penetrate and revive the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. During Haile Selassie's regime, missionaries were only allowed to proselytize among non-Christian ethnic groups, and the *Beta Israel* were a "favourite" group.

Although the *Beta Israel* were a tiny minority in Ethiopia, there is a disproportionately large amount of scientific literature on them, in general, and on missionary activity among them, in particular.<sup>5</sup> The numbers of actual converts in the nineteenth century were trifling: 65 souls converted until 1868, 1470 by 1894 and 1513 by 1908;<sup>6</sup> the number of converts in a single year rarely exceeded forty, although caution must be applied when discussing these numbers.<sup>7</sup>

There were several missions among the *Beta Israel* from the mid-nineteenth century on. In 1859, Reverend Samuel Gobat established the Falasha Mission under the auspices of the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews.<sup>8</sup> In 1862, the Church of Scotland also set up a Falasha Mission in Ethiopia. During the twentieth century, there were several missions to the *Beta Israel*, not least the mission headed by Eric Payne.<sup>9</sup>

Henry Aaron Stern (1820-1885), himself a converted Jew from Germany, was a major missionary for the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews. Upon arrival in Ethiopia in 1860, he obtained an audience with Emperor Tewodoros II, who referred him to Abuna Salama, the Egyptian head of the Ethiopian Church. Stern regarded the establishment of a mission among the *Beta Israel* as a stepping-stone to infiltrating the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. In Gondar, Stern held disputations with *Beta Israel* leaders, in which he challenged their disbelief in Jesus Christ as the Messiah, and scorned their rudimentary knowledge of the Bible.<sup>10</sup> In 1863 Emperor

---

<sup>5</sup> Nineteenth century missionary work has been summed up in KAPLAN 1987.

<sup>6</sup> SUMMERFIELD 2003, 32.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. KAPLAN 1992, 127.

<sup>8</sup> GIDNEY 1899.

<sup>9</sup> PAYNE 1972; TREVISAN SEMI 2002.

<sup>10</sup> SEEMAN 2000.

Tewodoros, insulted that he had never received a reply to his letter to Queen Victoria, imprisoned Stern along with nine fellow missionaries and British diplomatic staff.<sup>11</sup> A British expeditionary force, led by Sir Robert Napier, commander-in-chief of the Bombay army, with 12,000 soldiers, looted the imperial capital, and killed 700 Ethiopian defenders, freed Stern and the others. Tewodoros, defeated, committed suicide. Quirin reports that after an agreement reached with Menelik, Protestant missions were also expelled from Shawa, but native agents and other missions continued the work of the foreign missionaries.<sup>12</sup> In addition, a “counter-missionary” in the figure of the Dr. Jacques Faitlovitch emerged from the Jewish world with the intention of “saving” Jewish souls from the grasps of the Christian missionaries.<sup>13</sup>

The missionaries were the pioneers of modern education among local populations. The Swedish Evangelical Mission, established in 1866, was famous for promoting education. This was the very mission from which Dr. Jacques Faitlovitch, withdrew Taamerat Emmanuel in 1904, taking him to study normative Judaism, as well as secular subjects, in the Jewish communities of Palestine and Europe.<sup>14</sup>

## Methodology

This paper is unusual in the literature on 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century missionaries among the *Beta Israel* in that it will focus upon one particular Christian missionary, Mikael Aragawi. The origins of Aragawi can be disputed. The Pankhursts claimed that he was of Falasha origin,<sup>15</sup> but facing the evidence that I presented,<sup>16</sup> both Richard and Rita Pankhurst admitted that he could have been Christian. He was undoubtedly the most influential missionary among the *Beta Israel*. Nevertheless, he was

---

<sup>11</sup> WEIL 2010(a).

<sup>12</sup> QUIRIN 1991, 175-191.

<sup>13</sup> TREVISAN SEMI 2007.

<sup>14</sup> TREVISAN SEMI 2000; WEIL 2010(b).

<sup>15</sup> PANKHURST 1966; PANKHURST 1997.

<sup>16</sup> Paper presented at the XVII ICES (International Conference of Ethiopian Studies), Addis Abeba, 2009, which forms the basis for this chapter.

bound to the *Beta Israel* community both by deep ties of friendship and by marriage. As a result of his marriage to a Falasha woman, hundreds of Aragawi's descendants reside in Israel. As explained above, they emigrated to the state of Israel in the last 20 years through the Israeli Law of Return.

The paper relies primarily on oral history from Aragawi's descendants in Israel,<sup>17</sup> in addition to missionary documents. All information provided by informants orally was corroborated with the literature and other written material.

### **Mikael Aragawi: a Native Agent<sup>18</sup>**

Mikael Aragawi, an Amhara Christian, was the first Ethiopian Protestant missionary, who worked among the *Beta Israel* population on behalf of the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews during the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Aragawi was born in Dembeya to a father, Habtu, who was the servant of Reverend J. Nicholayson, a Protestant missionary. Nicholayson had worked as the German Protestant missionary Johann Martin Flad's cook on the latter's first mission from Jerusalem to Ethiopia in 1855.<sup>19</sup> Habtu's father was Gebremariam married to Zlalot. Aragawi's mother Taqlit, from a Christian land-owning family from Dembeya, had died when he was three. Taklit's father was Adgoayichew and her mother was Konjit. After his wife died, Habtu handed his son Mikael, aged seven, to Johann Martin Flad and his wife to raise, Aragawi thereby becoming Flad's first foster son. Habtu moved to Jerusalem from 1849 to work at the London Church Missionary Society station on Mount Zion, led by Reverend Samuel Gobat, who acted as the Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem after 1846, and he died there.

---

<sup>17</sup> QUIRIN 1991 relied on oral sources, but these were largely recorded in Ethiopia; my informants are in Israel.

<sup>18</sup> Some of the information in this section has been published in WEIL 2007.

<sup>19</sup> FLAD 1952.

In 1866, Aragawi left Ethiopia with Flad, who was sent as an envoy to Queen Victoria. Then Flad sent him to study in an orphanage in Baden, Germany. In 1869 and 1873-1874, Aragawi studied at the St. Chrischona Pilgermission in Switzerland, where he published the book in Amharic *Man's Heart, Either God's Temple or Satan's Abode*.<sup>20</sup> He was then sent back to Ethiopia as a missionary, together with a group of other St. Chrischona-trained Ethiopian missionaries e.g. Agaïe Sahlu, Iyob Niguise, Fanta Dawit and the Falasha Christian brothers Samani and Sanbatu Daniel.

After Tewodros II had imprisoned European missionaries from Ethiopia in 1863, as mentioned above, *Betä Ésrāyēl*-born agents, such as *däbtära* Bérru Wébe, Gäbrä Héywät and Iyob Néguie, ran the London Society mission in Ethiopia from 1864. Aragawi's group joined them in 1873, and the mission continued under the leadership of *däbtära* Bérru Wébe.

During his lifetime, Aragawi preached, taught Bible and converted the *Beta Israel*, while making sporadic excursions to Europe, when he in turn was also forbidden to continue his vocation in Ethiopia. He regularly sent letters back to the London Society and to the European director of the Falasha Mission, Martin Flad in Switzerland. Some of these letters, which are preserved in the collections of St. Chrischona and by the Flad family, from the 1879-1899 period have been recently published.<sup>21</sup> While Aragawi's contemporaries wrote their letters in Amharic, which were subsequently translated into German, Aragawi himself wrote in German. His reports in English to the London Society include descriptions of ravaging wild animals, and the theft, abduction and murder of a missionary. In 1880, in a letter signed by Michael Aragawy (sic), Debtera Beru and Daniel Sanbatu, the three native agents described the work at the mission school at Jenda, where 18-20 boys had enrolled, and the success in baptising one or two Falashas (sic).<sup>22</sup> In 1883, Aragawi toured *Beta Israel* villages, along with a

---

<sup>20</sup> ARAGAWI 1870.

<sup>21</sup> SMIDT 2009.

<sup>22</sup> I found the original letter at the CMJ mission in St. Albans, England in 1988. It was also published in *Jewish Intelligence and Monthly Account of the Proceedings* (JI), July 1880.



co-missionary of *Beta Israel* origin, Goshu Mersha, and participated in several weddings with a view to converting the *Oritawi* (Torah-abiding) *Beta Israel*.<sup>23</sup>

In 1885, Mikael Aragawi visited Germany via Egypt and traveled from there to England to join Flad at the British and Foreign Bible Society in London, where they worked on a revised edition of the Amharic Bible published at St. Chrischona. Upon his return to Ethiopia, Aragawi was incarcerated by the Mayor of Gondar after being accused by Ethiopian Christians of being an enemy of the Virgin Mary, and was released after his co-missionary Debtera Beru appealed to the governor of Gondar. In 1887, he was forced to flee with his family to escape the Mahdist dervishes, a Muslim fraternity, who were raiding Ethiopia from the south. During the *Kifu-qen* famine (1888-1892), Aragawi, like other local agents, suffered great hardship, although he succeeded in converting starving *Beta Israel* to Christianity during this period. In August 1892, Aragawi reported:

Day by day the members of our household stand before me weeping and saying "Give us bread, give us clothing to cover our nakedness" but I have nothing to give them. Daily I go with them into the woods to seek fruits, herbs, and roots, what we find we cook and eat, mostly without salt, because it is too dear. For two years we have not tasted meat or butter, far less eaten to satisfying (sic). Many Abyssinians feel upon the carcasses of asses and hyenas; they eat to satiate their hunger and they die. Mothers have cooked and eaten their own offspring. Horrible things are done, about which I cannot write more."<sup>24</sup>

By 1892, after the death of Debtera Beroo, Aragawi became the head of the major Falasha Christian station of the London Society at Jenda on Lake Thana, which he operated along with other "native agents", such as Sanbatu, Debtera Hiob Negusie and Debtera Beroo.<sup>25</sup> After a brief return visit to Germany, in 1894, Aragawi organized an evangelist conference with Flad on the latter's last journey to Ethiopia.

---

<sup>23</sup> KAPLAN 1992, 134.

<sup>24</sup> JI February 1893, 145-146.

<sup>25</sup> JI 1893, 150.

After the Battle of Adewa and the attempt to forge alliances between Ethiopian and European powers, Aragawi was permitted officially to operate in Jenda and Azzezo in Dembeya. In 1923, Aragawi was invited to St. Chrischona for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his dedication as an evangelist. He returned to the mission station at Jenda, where he lived until his death in 1931.

### **Mikael Aragawi's Mission**

Aragawi, as a “native agent” did not differ from the European missionaries in his mission to proselytize and bring the “true” religion to the knowledge of the masses. Although he focused upon the *Beta Israel*, he preached normally to Ethiopian Christians at the same time and place as the Falashas and the audience was mixed Falashas and Christians.<sup>26</sup> In the July 1905 report that Aragawi sent, he stated that “he was thankful that he had the opportunity to preach Christ to a large number of Native Christians.”<sup>27</sup>

Like other missionaries, Aragawi worked as a scholar and translator.<sup>28</sup> He was proficient in several languages and as early as 1870 he had published the abovementioned book.<sup>29</sup> He produced a revised translation of the New Testament into Amharic, at the request of the Swedish mission, which was eventually incorporated into the Emperor Haile Selassie's Bible and printed at the Bérhanénna Sälam printing press in Addis Abeba before his death in 1931.

Mikael Aragawi married a *Beta Israel* woman called Telelech, the daughter of Eyesu Abren and Averash Tedel from Dembeya. Together, they had four daughters – Asnika, Fetelework, Beletech and Wude, and one son, Ménkéř Arägawí.<sup>30</sup> Telelech was buried in the *Beta Israel*

---

<sup>26</sup> SUMMERFIELD 2003, 32.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>28</sup> CRUMMEY and KAPLAN 2007, 980.

<sup>29</sup> ARAGAWI 1870.

<sup>30</sup> Aragawi had an additional daughter called Tafesech, who lived and died in Gondar. This information comes from their grandson resident in Israel. The identity of this other wife is unknown, as is whether Aragawi married her before or after Telelech.

cemetery in Melkegeneya, Jenda. All the daughters<sup>31</sup> married members of the *Beta Israel* community, or Falasha Christians, and their descendants live in Israel today as Jews. One of Asnika's daughters, Truwork, recently died in the city of Beersheba, Israel; another died in Hadera, Israel. Fetelework married a Falasha Christian, who had fled from Qwara to Chilga and they were engaged in crafts. Their daughter Yeneleam married Kiede Shiferaw and they had four children, most of whose descendants are in Israel today. Aragawi's great-grandson said: "In the family, we heard that Aragawi asked (about potential husbands): 'What does he know?' Not 'How many cows does he have?' Aragawi placed great importance on the craft of weaving, despite its lowly status."<sup>32</sup> Beletech married Detale Baruch, a Falasha Christian. Their children reside in the town of Tira, Israel. Wude in turn married a Falasha Christian and some of their descendants are also in Israel.

Menker continued his father's missionary work in collaboration with Martin Flad's son, Friedrich Flad. Menker married a Falasha Christian from Jenda, and continued his father's interest in promoting the study of crafts for the *Beta Israel*. Aragawi's successor as the director of the Falasha Mission became Friedrich Flad's son-in-law, Willy Heintze-Flad in 1925. In 1952 Aragawi's biography was published from the *Nachlass* of Friedrich Flad. Aragawi, although he was originally Christian, was buried near his wife Telelech in the cemetery of the Falasha Christians in the village of Melkegnaye in Jenda, along with other *Beta Israel*.

### **Mikael Aragawi's Legacy**

As Seeman has pointed out in a recent book tellingly entitled *One People, One Blood*: "The mission to the Beta Israel may not have been the largest or the most numerically successful of the European missionary projects in the Horn of Africa at the time, but it quickly managed to upset and transform conditions for life among the Beta

---

<sup>31</sup> Except perhaps Asnika. More information has to yet be gathered on this point.

<sup>32</sup> Interview at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 22.9.2009.

Israel while inadvertently also serving as a wedge for the European conquest of this proud African Kingdom (Ethiopia-S.W.)”.<sup>33</sup> Mikael Aragawi’s descendants have been called *Deqqe Mezzuran Flad* (The pioneer followers of Flad), and the thousands of *Beta Israel* converts were designated *Ya Flad Lejoch* (Flad’s Children), among which Aragawi literally could be counted since he was adopted by the Flads. “The new converts were neither assimilated completely into Amhara Orthodox society nor did they totally lose their *Beta Israel* identity. Rather, they became known as a new group of Falasha Christians.”<sup>34</sup>

It is these Falasha Christians, or *Ya Flad Lejoch*, who are today clamouring to emigrate to the State of Israel. At the time of writing, 7,000 souls, today designated *Felesmura*, are waiting in a compound in Gondar and demanding Israeli citizenship.

## Bibliography

- ARAGAWI M., *Man’s Heart, Either God’s Temple or Satan’s Abode - yäsäw libb y’igzi’abihér mäqdäs wäym yäsäyt’an madärya*, St Chrisona, Pilgrim-Mission-Press, 1870.
- CRUMMEY D. and KAPLAN S., *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, 3, Siegbert U. (ed.), Wiesbaden, 2007.
- FLAD F., *Michael Argawi: ein mutiger Bekenner und Zeuge unter den Falascha in Abessinien*, Basel, Brunnen-Verlag, 1952.
- GIDNEY W.T., *Sites and Scenes. Description of the Oriental Missions of the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews from 1899-1908*, London, 1899.
- KAPLAN S., “The Beta Israel (Falasha) Encounter with Protestant Missionaries: 1860-1905”, *Jewish Social Studies*, 49, 1, 1987, 27-42.
- KAPLAN S., *The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia. From Earliest Times to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, New York and London, New York University Press, 1992.
- PANKHURST R., “Ethiopia’s First Protestant Missionary”, *Ethiopian Observer*, 10, Addis Abeba, 1966.

---

<sup>33</sup> SEEMAN 2009, 52.

<sup>34</sup> QUIRIN 1991, 179.

- PANKHURST R., "Mikael Aragawi", *Encyclopaedia Africana Dictionary of African Biography: Ethiopia-Ghana*, 1, L. H. Ofofu-Appiah (ed.-in-chief), New York, 1997.
- PAYNE E., *Ethiopian Jews: the Story of a Mission*, London, Olive Press, 1972.
- QUIRIN J., *The Evolution of the Ethiopian Jews: A history of the Beta Israel (Falasha) to 1920*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991.
- SMIDT W., "Deutsche Briefe von Äthiopiern aus der Protestantischen Mission: Von der Reichseinigung unter Yohannis IV bis zur grossen Hungersnot (1879 bis 1889)", *Orientalia Parthenopea*, 9, 2009, 9-52.
- SEEMAN D., "Bodies and Narratives: the Question of Kinship in the Beta Israel-European Encounter (1860-1920)", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 30, 1, 2000, 86-120.
- SEEMAN D., *One People, One Blood: Ethiopian Israelis and The Return to Judaism*, New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 2009.
- SUMMERFIELD D., *From Falashas to Ethiopian Jews: the External Influences for Change c. 1860-1960*, London, Routledge Curzon, 2003.
- TREVISAN SEMI E., *L'Epistolario di Taamrat Emmanuel: Un intellettuale ebreo d'Etiopia nella prima metà del XX secolo/La corrispondance de Taamrat Emmanuel, intellectuel juif d'Ethiopie dans la première moitié du XXème siècle*, Torino, L'Harmattan Italia, 2000.
- TREVISAN SEMI E., "The Conversion of the Beta Israel in Ethiopia: a Reversible Rite of Passage", *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, 1,1, 2002, 90-103.
- TREVISAN SEMI E., *Jacques Faitlovitch and the Jews of Ethiopia*, London, Mitchell Vallentine, 2007.
- WEIL S., "Collective Designations and Collective Identity among Ethiopian Jews", *Israel Social Science Research*, 10, 2, 1995, 25-40.
- WEIL S., "Mikael Aragawi", *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, 4, Siegbert U. (ed.), Wiesbaden, 2007, 961-962.
- WEIL S., "Stern Henry", *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, Siegbert U. (ed.), Wiesbaden, 2010(a) (forthcoming).
- WEIL S., "Taamerat Ammanuel", *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, Siegbert U. (ed.), Wiesbaden, 2010(b) (forthcoming).

### **Journal**

- Jewish Intelligence and Monthly Account of the Proceedings* (JI), London, London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews, July 1880.



Mikael Arägawi during his stay in Europe in 1893. Courtesy of S. Chrischona Pilgermission, reproduced in Weil S., Mikael Arägawi, EAE, p. 962.

# THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE GONDAR COMPOUND: “WAITING” AND WHAT IT MEANS

*Ravit Cohen, Tel Aviv University, Israel*

## Introduction

This article is based on field research conducted at the Gondar transition compound in Ethiopia between the years 2005-2008.<sup>1</sup> The Gondar compound hosts members of the *Zera Beta Israel* community, better known as the *Felesmora*.<sup>2</sup> In 1993, the Supreme Court of Israel defined the *Zera Beta Israel* community as “descendants of an ethnic Jewish community (Beta Israel) who converted to Christianity over time because of certain social and historical circumstances.”<sup>3</sup> The court also maintained that the community preserved their singularity, at

---

<sup>1</sup> The duration of the field research was three and a half months in 2005, one month in 2007 and one month in 2008.

<sup>2</sup> The designation *Zera Beta Israel* is taken from SHABTAY 2006. At the compound, the members of the community are referred to as *Beta Israel*. For them, the term Falasha is an insult which can be translated as “rootless, a stranger, an intruder.” If this term is used in Israel, they consider it alienating and depriving them of a sense of belonging. The term Falasha or Falasi probably is related to the decree of the fifteenth century emperor Yeshaq, who defeated the Jews and burned their villages. He stipulated that only those Jews who converted to Christianity and were baptized should be allowed to inherit lands, and the rest were designated as *flasi* (TADDESSE 1972). Researchers believe that this designation existed already before the destruction of the Jewish kingdom, and after this event received a sense of “people without rights to land.” Ethiopian Christians used the term falasha mostly as a derogatory word, but external observers (such as the Israel Embassy) used it as well (QUIRIN 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Supreme Court of Israel, Ruling 3317, 1993.

least partially because of the discriminatory treatment it received from the surrounding non-Jewish population. The court also acknowledged the desire of this community to return to their Jewish roots and to immigrate to Israel.

Historically, the *Zera Beta Israel* converted to Christianity for several reasons. In the nineteenth century, the difficulty to survive under the dire economic and social conditions, the weakening of spiritual guidance and religious institutions, as well as the activity of Christian missionaries from Europe, convinced some people to convert in the hope that it would allow them to live as equals among equals.<sup>4</sup> The conversion did not result from theological considerations but was rather a means of survival.<sup>5</sup> Members of the *Zera Beta Israel* community claim that they were forced to abide by the norms of a non-Jewish lifestyle since they were descendants of people who had been forced to convert against their will. However, they did their best to preserve at least some of the customs of Ethiopian Jewry, thereby never completing their separation from the Ethiopian Jewish community.<sup>6</sup> The converts and their descendants were forever marked by liminality, in the sense which Turner attributes to this concept.<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, their conversion did not lead to complete assimilation and did not guarantee them equal rights and opportunities with their Christian compatriots. On the other hand, members of the *Zera Beta Israel* community could not mix with other Ethiopian Jews. The *Zera Beta Israel* were left in a kind of a social limbo.<sup>8</sup> Finally, ever since their immigration to Israel began in the early 1990s, the story of the *Zera Beta Israel* community is set in two cultural dimensions (Ethiopia and Israel) and in two religions (Judaism and Christianity), making their case unique and complex.

In this article I focus on the Gondar compound, which is the main

---

<sup>4</sup> SEEMAN 2009; MESSING 1982; QUIRIN 1992; PAYNE 1972; WALDMAN 1995, 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 1995, 18-19; CORINALDI 2001, 161-169; WALDMAN and KIMCHI 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. COHEN 2006, 10; SHABTAY 2006, 37; SALAMON 1994.

<sup>7</sup> TURNER 1967.

<sup>8</sup> HAZAN 1980.



terminal and waiting station for Ethiopian Jews on their long journey from rural villages in Ethiopia to Israel. In the following pages, I introduce the concept of “waiting” as a key term for capturing the unique experience of such an intermediary stage, one that can be placed somewhere between being a refugee and being an immigrant.

### Leaving the Village

“We took a bus. This was my first time on a bus, so that I did not know what to look at, everything was moving; I had never travelled by bus before... At first I thought Gondar is somewhere near Israel, I thought we were going to spend a few days there and then come to Israel, I knew all the *Beta Israel* people were gathering in Gondar, I knew this is what God commanded us to do, and even though I had left my friends behind, and my father stayed behind in the village, too, I still decided to go with my mother.”<sup>9</sup>

People started leaving their villages upon termination of Operation Solomon (1991). This was the first step on the long journey to Israel. Scientific literature<sup>10</sup> as well as field data shows that there were four major reasons that made thousands of members of the *Zera Beta Israel* community to abandon their villages and set out on their way to Addis Abeba and to Gondar. Their reasons included religious and national factors (the belief that Israel is a land promised to the Jews by God), family factors (longing to reunite with relatives in Israel), political and social factors (some of those who were left behind in the villages became a convenient target for victimization), and economic imperatives (those waiting at the compound believe that in Israel they will be able to study and work, thus improving their economic status).

Some of those who left their villages and came to Gondar and Addis Abeba were “stuck” there for many years – some since 1991.

<sup>9</sup> Excerpt from a 2005 interview with Kafale, who had been waiting seven years in Gondar. All names used in this article are fictitious.

<sup>10</sup> PETERSON 1958; STILLWELL and CONGDON 1991; SPUNTA 2002; BRETTELL and HOLLIFIED 2000.

They developed a life style that became characteristic of the compound. The short time to be spent at the “intermediary station” turned into an indefinite period where every day brings with it a new beginning – and a new end. Children, whose parents hoped to see them grow up in Israel, got married and had their own children in Gondar. A whole generation was born and grew up in this place, in the culture of the compound without an end in sight. The major question to be asked regarding this phenomenon is how it happened that the waiting of many years turned into one of the central elements that shaped the consciousness and identity of those who finally came to Israel, after all those years. In order to answer this question, we must first define the concepts “emigrant” and “refugee,” and determine the connection between the two.

### **Emigrants, Refugees and “the Waiting Ones”**

People hoping to immigrate to Israel arrive at the compound as emigrants, and there they become refugees. However, these are not regular refugees; they have their distinctive features. At the compound, being a refugee and an emigrant at the same time gives rise to a new category: “the waiting ones.” Thus, to date, members of the *Zera Beta Israel* community who are still living at the compound are refugees of a new kind, since they are “those who are waiting to emigrate.”

Emigration involves transformation at both micro (individual) and macro (society) levels. The approaches to emigration as transition between cultures imply that this process involves changes on all levels for the emigrant, be it physical, cultural, emotional, cognitive or social. These studies focus primarily on the two extremes of the emigration process – that is, on people’s experiences either in their native country before emigration, or upon their arrival in the country of destination. This paper deals primarily with the condition of those preparing to leave their native country (at the “starting” point), while the larger research project this paper is based on is concerned with the process of emigration/immigration as a whole, including the various stages the immigrants go through at the “receiving” end.

Anthropological research on emigration relates to processes of transition from village to city (internal emigration), between countries (external emigration), and between people and places.<sup>11</sup> In the life of *Zera Beta Israel*, a central role is played by the journey itself, which in this article includes the time of waiting and living in the compound.

At the Geneva Convention in 1951, refugees were defined as “persons who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, are outside the country of their nationality and are unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country.”<sup>12</sup> The transition from “citizen” to “refugee” consists of several stages: first, there is a sense of being threatened, followed by the desire to escape. The next stage is living in a state of danger, after which the refugee reaches a safer place, usually a refugee camp, where he or she will spend a certain period of time. At this point, the ways of the refugees part: some of them will move on to other countries, while others will stay in the refugee camps. These differences are determined by previous behavioural patterns, as well as the readiness to open up to a new culture.<sup>13</sup> Taking these different stages into account helps us understand the situation of some of the people waiting at the Gondar compound – those who had lived in villages, were forced to leave their homes and escape, and then arrived at the compound, which they saw as a temporary and secure place on their way to Israel.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> BRETTELL and HOLLIFIED 2000, 6-16.

<sup>12</sup> Public Information Section, Relating to the Status of Refugees, Convention and Protocol, United Nations High Commissioner For Refugees, August 1996, 16-19.

<sup>13</sup> STEIN 1981, 321.

<sup>14</sup> Admittedly, not all those living at the compound were forced to escape from their villages; many departed voluntarily. As Alafa said in Gondar in 2007: “Before we left the village, we got organized, sold the cows and the land, and only after that did we go to Gondar.”

## Compound vs. Refugee Camp?

Murphy describes a number of features that are characteristic of a refugee camp.<sup>15</sup> It is with reference to these features that we can discern some parallels between the Gondar compound and refugee camps in the world. The features are as follows:

- a. a separation between the local population and those living in the camp;
- b. shared facilities;
- c. insufficient privacy, extreme crowdedness;
- d. a strictly limited space in which the community is contained;
- e. daily life is organized by other people or authorities.

In character and in organization, the compound is similar to refugee camps across the world, for example, those in Vietnam, Sudan, and other countries. It is also similar to “temporary” refugee camps, such as those in Gaza and Lebanon, that turned into intermediary emigration compounds and later into permanent refugee camps, whose residents wait for dozens of years to receive the keys to “their own homes”.

People living in a refugee camp develop a certain degree of dependence on this framework, which goes hand in hand with their special and limited status as refugees, at the basis of which is the realization that the life of a refugee is governed by others. Knudsen points out that the reality of refugee camps is perceived as not easily comprehensible, as something turned “upside down” with respect to the world outside, as a waste of time, permeated by a sense of passivity and uncertainty with regard to the future, a feeling of being caught between hope and disappointment.<sup>16</sup>

In keeping with Murphy’s paradigm, at the compound, these characteristics are expressed in the following ways:

---

<sup>15</sup> MURPHY 1955, 91-98.

<sup>16</sup> KNUDSEN 1983, 170.

### *Separation from the local population*

Members of the *Zera Beta Israel* community are guests in Gondar and/or in Addis Abeba. This is how the local population sees them, and quite often their local neighbours point out that those living at the compound are only temporary visitors there. This leads to a separation between the two groups, in a physical sense of space division, as well as on the psychological and social level.<sup>17</sup> The physical separation is illustrated by the structure of the houses as well as by the larger spatial divisions inside the neighbourhoods or the city. First of all, all houses in which the residents of the compound live are rented from local landlords, which creates a clear division between the landlord who is “from the area” and the residents of the compound who are “not from the area.” As Tegaw put it, “I cannot grow crops here the way I used to in my village, it is not my house, this is not my garden...”<sup>18</sup> Fences clearly separate community facilities such as the school, synagogue, and food distribution centre from the rest of the neighbourhood. Only members of the community have access to them. In addition to the obvious physical divisions, there are other invisible boundaries, which are clear and known to all. For example, there are discursive limits: which topics can be discussed in the presence of one’s neighbours and which topics cannot. “Although the neighbours know that I am waiting to make an *aliyah* to Israel, I would never talk about it in their presence”.<sup>19</sup>

The psychological and social separation can be primarily observed in the dividing lines between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Consequently, there are separate places of worship (the synagogue for “the waiting ones” and churches or mosques for the local population)

<sup>17</sup> There is also the issue of women’s freedom of movement. There are areas in which women are allowed to move freely and others where they are not. A woman named Fitfitie said: “I am never on my own; I am always with my brother or with a friend...” (Excerpt from an interview from 2007 with Fitfitie, who had been waiting eight years in Gondar).

<sup>18</sup> Excerpt from an interview from 2008 with Tegaw, who had been waiting eleven years in Gondar.

<sup>19</sup> Excerpt from an interview from 2007 with Daniel, who had been waiting nine years in Gondar.

for religious and communal ceremonies. Thus, there are fixed meeting places, which create discursive frameworks limited to the community of “the waiting ones,” from which the local population is excluded.

An additional division marker between the local population and the residents of the compound is the latter’s dependence on assistance from external bodies. Many of “the waiting ones” receive financial support and food from organizations with representatives on the compound, as well as from families in Israel. The Christians believe that “many of ‘the waiting ones’ are very wealthy, since they receive money from their families in Israel,” even though in fact “the waiting ones” lead a life of poverty defined by despair and uncertainty.

Being labelled by the Christians as Falasha, *Buda* or some other stigmatic designation<sup>20</sup> creates a clear division between these groups: “In the vicinity of the market there are people who insult the *Beta Israel*<sup>21</sup> people by calling out ‘Falasha, go home’. – Is this what you hear, too? – Yes, from Christian kids. – And how do they know you are from *Beta Israel* and not Christian? – Everybody knows that... Because the Christians know each other, they know who was born in a village and who grew up here, they can easily know that, and they can also tell by the clothes one wears. – So it is not enough to have spent seven years in Gondar to look like one from the town, is it? – No, it’s not enough...”<sup>22</sup>

### *Shared facilities*

Since they feel that the compound is just a temporary station, “the waiting ones” do not acquire household tools and utensils, but share what they have. “I do not want to become rich here, I do not buy any clothes or any household tools. We share everything. In Israel I

---

<sup>20</sup> *Buda* is a kind of evil eye. For more on the designations of the *Beta Israel*, see WEIL 1995; QUIRIN 1992; MESSING 1982.

<sup>21</sup> Meaning *Zera Beta Israel*.

<sup>22</sup> Excerpt from an interview from 2005 with Moshe, who had been waiting seven years in Gondar.

will work hard and I will become rich, and then I will have a house, clothes, working tools and many other things.”<sup>23</sup>

In every house at the compound there is a bed, bags with clothes, some cooking facilities, and small table cups and other similar items, which are normally shared by a number of families and neighbours.

### *Insufficient privacy*

Living in the compound means living in crowded conditions. In every house, several people share the same bed. The average size of a house is about 20-25 square metres. Sometimes there is a curtain separating adults from children, sometimes there is nothing at all. The house itself is actually just one room in which the members of the family spend their time eating, talking, studying and sleeping – that is, living. Several houses usually share one radio. Sometimes a wall separates the houses; in other cases the wall is not high enough to provide complete privacy, so that whatever is said in one of the houses can be heard by the neighbours.

### *Limited access areas*

The communal areas assigned for the use of the community members are limited access areas, and whoever wants to enter them must undergo a security check and present an identification document. There, “the waiting ones” receive special services to which only they are entitled: there is an embassy bureau where representatives of the Israeli Ministry of the Interior and the Jewish Agency hold office hours; there is a synagogue, a *mikve* (ritual bath), a school, a clinic, and some other facilities.

---

<sup>23</sup> Excerpt from an interview from 2005 with Yimker, who had been waiting seven years in Gondar.

*Daily life is organized by organisations*

A number of external organizations are involved in providing assistance for “the waiting ones” at the compound.<sup>24</sup> Often it is because of the activity of these organizations that the way of life in the compound is different from the way of life in the village or in the city. Life in the compound is punctuated by attending services at the synagogue, going to the community school, to the food distribution centre, to the ritual bath, to the doctor and/or to the representatives of the Israeli Ministry of the Interior (which “the waiting ones” call “the embassy”). As I will show below, the daily routine of the people at the compound is organized around these activities, so that they become dependent on the bodies providing the services, just as they are dependent on their families in Israel.

It is clear that “the waiting ones,” while they are still in Ethiopia, live a different way of life than they used to live in their villages. While waiting to emigrate to Israel, they are exposed to the organizational practices of Ethiopian, Israeli and American authorities. Even though the compound is situated in Ethiopia, their country of origin, it shares many characteristic features with camps of political refugees, and the personal and collective experiences of its residents are essentially defined by their being refugees, and not belonging to the surrounding community. Life at the compound is characterized by longing for

---

<sup>24</sup> Some of these organizations are actually present, while others work on a “long distance” basis. Until 2005, NACOEJ (North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry) was active in Addis Abeba and in Gondar; it stopped its work in Ethiopia in 2005, and the compound in Addis Abeba was closed. In Gondar, NACOEJ set up “The Association of Beta Israel.” NACOEJ opened a synagogue, a school, a library, a work center, a *mikve*, and a sports group for children. Today, “The Association Beta Israel” is responsible for maintaining all these facilities in Gondar. In addition, there is a clinic operated by the Joint Distribution Committee, where some of those waiting can receive medical help and food, and where young mothers can turn for help; there is also a drama room. In addition, there are organizations which are not actually present at the compound, but which still have an influence on the way life there. These include the Jewish Agency, the Government of Israel, Shvut-Am Institute, and the South Wing of Zion Organization. For more on the influence of different organizations on the life at the compound see COHEN 2006, 58-69.



something different, dreaming of another life, and waiting for an opportunity to move on, as can be discerned from the practices of “waiting” and “not doing anything.”

### **“What are you doing? Nothing, just waiting”**

“Waiting” and “doing nothing” are the two major factors that define the daily routine and general way of life for the people at the compound. This daily routine is implicitly structured by the various organizations and the families in Israel, who sometimes, however indirectly, represent for “the waiting ones” Israel and the opportunity to obtain an “entry permit” to this country.<sup>25</sup> The practices around which this daily routine is organized are essentially a unique combination of waiting and minimal active investment in the future, while the present moment becomes frozen. Samuel expressed this in a rather laconic manner: “Life is different here, it is not like living in the village; nor is it like living in town.”<sup>26</sup>

The following field diary excerpt shows why:

In the morning, Father goes to the synagogue, where he hears all the news and meets his friends. When he comes to the synagogue, he puts on the big prayer shawl and phylacteries. The prayer begins; the leaders are praying on the stage. There is a curtain separating women from men, and then announcements are made from the stage – people are told, for example, when *teff*<sup>27</sup> will be distributed, what is happening at the compound, what news has been received from Israel and from the United States. Then, the names of the “winners” are read out – those who can go to the embassy on this particular day,<sup>28</sup> as well as the names of those to whom relatives

---

<sup>25</sup> For further information on these organizations, see: COHEN 2006, 58-69.

<sup>26</sup> Excerpt from an interview from 2007 with Alafa, who had been waiting nine years in Gondar.

<sup>27</sup> A local grain with high nutrient concentration from which the staple bread *enjera* is made.

<sup>28</sup> There are also representatives of the “embassy” visiting each house in order to notify the relevant families, so that one does not necessarily have to go to the synagogue for that.

in Israel have sent money. In the first years, the relatives in Israel would send a lot of money; today, they are sending less, so that “the waiting ones” have trouble paying rent, water and medicines. There is hardly any problem with food and medications in this sense, since these are provided by the external bodies. Father sometimes comes back home after prayer, and sometimes he goes to see his friends. When he comes back home, he usually brings other people with him. Mother or Emawaish, the elder daughter, prepare *buna* [coffee] and *enjera*[bread] for them, and then they sit and talk. They tell each other stories of life in the village, speak about those who made an *aliyah* and those who have received the visa, discuss the possibilities of speeding up the process. The adults spend their whole day talking. In the village, they used to work in the fields, but here there is no work for them. Sometimes Father thinks that there is a message waiting for him at the embassy, so he goes there after the synagogue, and just sits at the entrance to the building. He waits for somebody to come out and call the names. If his name is not called, Father asks why, but usually he gets no answer and then he returns home, irritable and sad. Tzhi, the older brother, is at work most of the day. In the morning he goes looking for work. He doesn't have regular employment, so it is whatever he finds on a particular day. Sometimes he helps transport felled trees or stones, on other days he works at stonecutting. It is something different each day. Every day he earns a different sum of money; sometimes it is five *Birr*, sometimes it is seven *Birr*.<sup>29</sup> He brings the money home to his parents, to help them pay the rent. Emawaish does not walk around the compound on her own. She must be either in the house or in the yard, because girls cannot walk around on their own. Sometimes she takes Fentahun to the food distribution centre or to the water station, but she does not go out with her friends, she doesn't go anywhere on her own. She is always in the yard or close to another member of the family, so that nobody can hurt her. If she were living in the village, she would be married by now, but because everybody here is waiting, people get married later. Father spends a lot of time with his friends, and they talk about the village and about the *aliyah* to Israel, and they also solve problems for other people, because many people die here so that Father goes to a lot to funerals. Mother spends a lot of time with neighbours and on her own. The women repair their clothes together; they wash *teff* and beans together because there is one kitchen outside for all of them. Many times during the day guests come, for a coffee and a chat. They talk about the embassy all the time,

---

<sup>29</sup> One Ethiopian *birr* is the equivalent of 0.05 Euros.

about what documents have already been signed, whose photograph [for the visa] has already been taken. Most of the time we do not do anything at all, we just live in order to come to Israel, and this is how we spend our time – doing practically nothing and waiting... In the end, we will arrive there...<sup>30</sup>

This description of the routine at the compound emphasizes the special “waiting” lifestyle. This lifestyle is organized around a concept of time which combines the perception of time characteristic of the village, defined by Evans-Pritchard as “ecological time”, and “structural time” as a temporal category normally defining life in the West.<sup>31</sup> The intertwining of the past (village) and the expectation (Israel) has a powerful impact on the daily life of these people and creates a special pattern of routine which incorporates these two perceptions of time.

The following description of a typical day at the compound shows that the process of waiting is defined by two major factors:

### *The sense of temporariness*

“The waiting ones” are not living at home – rather, they are “temporary guests.” Their homes are temporary, their families are split and they do not see their future either in Gondar or in Addis Abeba. The village, as the place from which they came, does not belong to them any more (most of them cannot return there), and the city in which they find themselves is not accessible to them. This element of temporariness creates a sense of uncertainty, of living one’s life “from one moment to the next,” without thinking beyond the immediate future. For these people, each day is built around the needs of the present moment; they do not think about what will happen once they have spent one more week, or one more month in Ethiopia. Thus, the daily activities are divided into those which are grounded in the perception of time “from this moment to the next”, and planning/postponing other activities until after they immigrate. A clear example of this is given in Temesgen’s statement: “Even though I am seventeen, and I have been waiting for

---

<sup>30</sup> Field research diary, September 2005.

<sup>31</sup> EVANS-PRITCHARD 1940, 94-96.

seven years here in Gondar, I will not get married because I want to come to Israel and study there.” The sense of temporariness goes hand in hand with the feeling of insecurity and a lack of stability in the present as well as in the future.

### *Hopes and expectations*

Some researchers claim that hopes and expectations have a positive effect on making one engage in daily activities.<sup>32</sup> Minkowski says that hopes and expectations make people act in the present, with an eye to the distant future. The actions related to the near future (the present) are routine daily activities that create joy and fear and influence the present, while the actions directed at the distant future are limited to observation, prayer and ethnical action. These activities create a sense of the present as a temporary reality, the future being the only dimension worth living for. This unknown dimension, the still-unexplored realm, creates the dream of an ideal future. Most daily activities are based on memories of the past, or performed for the distant future, according to hopes and expectations.<sup>33</sup>

On the other hand, there are researchers who claim that hopes and expectations have a paralyzing effect on daily activities, resulting in people doing practically nothing.<sup>34</sup> The person is hoping and waiting passively, waiting for the future to come, often fully aware of the fact that what he or she is waiting for is not realistic. It may well be that this hope is an illusion, and the person knows that whatever he or she does will not help it materialize.

The compound gives us examples of both these ways of living and perceiving one's place in reality. There are some constructive activities performed in the present and for the sake of the future, while there are also cases of complete paralysis of action. It seems to me, however, that cases of paralysis are more numerous, and that hoping and waiting make the present “freeze.” Hoping to start a new life in

---

<sup>32</sup> MINKOWSKI 1970; MOLTMANN 1967; STOTLAND 1969.

<sup>33</sup> MINKOWSKI 1970, 98-102.

<sup>34</sup> CRAPANZANO 2000; BLOCH 1986.

Israel, to reunite with the family, to have one's own big house, to hold a regular job, to study somewhere, to immerse oneself in "the Western way of life," to live in a technologically advanced society etc. – all this strengthens the feeling that there is something to wait for. Most of the people at the compound believe that in Israel, they will be able to live "a normal life," that they will have a certain status, will be able to stop waiting and will realize their national and economic aspirations. The conversations about Israel and the ties with that country strengthen these expectations and enable the people to cope with daily hardships. However, the realization that there is no definite date, no deadline by which the "waiting" will be over, sometimes makes it harder to live a normal life in the present, resulting in a sense of desperation. In most cases, this desperation becomes especially acute when somebody is called to the embassy and is informed there that he or she will not be getting the visa: "Why does the State of Israel lie to us? Why are they telling us they are organizing *aliyah* for the people, and not doing it? We have been here for such a long time, and nothing is moving..."<sup>35</sup>

Another important constituent of the life at the compound is fear. A long waiting is likely to have yet another effect on people's personalities: making them fearful. Green describes fear as a reaction to danger.<sup>36</sup> From the social point of view fear works destructively on human relationships, making families, neighbours and friends suspicious of each other. In some sense, this fear turns into a defining factor in people's lives. It is not seen explicitly, but is always sensed, so that it is no longer perceived as an acute emotion but is rather a constant part of the daily routine. Sometimes this fear is repressed, while at other times it becomes an impetus to invent survival strategies and coping mechanisms, thus creating a new communal order. The effect of fear is not always personal or psychological; sometimes it has ramifications on the level of the collective. Sometimes fear is not to be observed from the outside – the emotion is imprisoned in a person's body, and its voice speaks, quietly but sharply, through the person's

---

<sup>35</sup> Excerpt from an interview from 2005 with Kassa, who had been waiting eight years in Gondar.

<sup>36</sup> GREEN 1994, 227.

movements, by making the person lonely, miserable and unhappy, by forcing certain patterns of behaviour upon him or her. Sometimes the voice of fear is not heard at all, but the body itself turns into a receptacle of collective social and political memory.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, as Spinoza observed, fear is inextricably linked to hope, hope making the present experiences more bearable.<sup>38</sup>

There are two sides to the fear experienced by people in Gondar. First of all, people are afraid they might be denied the permission to make *aliyah*, and their dream will not be realized. But in addition to that, there is a more direct sense of fear coming from daily experiences: the people are afraid of their Christian neighbours and of strangers, the women are afraid of men, and there is a general fear of social sanctions being imposed. It thus appears that the waiting process creates an emotional atmosphere defined by expectation, fear, hope, dependence and a sense of insecurity that sets the emotional framework in which “the waiting ones” live and with which they later come to Israel.

I will now present four examples from daily life at the compound, where the ramifications of the process of waiting are clearly observable:

*Housing.* All “the waiting ones” live in houses rented from Christians. They cannot acquire their own houses (nor are they interested in doing so) since they believe that this is just a transitory station for them, and also because their financial situation does not allow them to do so. Each yard is surrounded by a number of small houses occupied by families from the community. However, usually they are not related, even though they share many things. The Christian landlord is the one dictating the rules for each yard, his house is bigger than the houses in which the members of the Jewish community live (he would usually have a toilet in the yard – or rather, a hole in the ground, - electricity, television etc.), while the Jewish residents have no access to any of these facilities and cannot grow crops. Knowing, as these people do, that they have no home, that their houses are rented,

---

<sup>37</sup> SCHEPER-HUGHES 1992; SCHEPER-HUGHES and BOURGOIS 2004; GREEN 1994; MALKKI 1995, 93-95.

<sup>38</sup> ARENDT 1958, 243.

and that their neighbours know they are only temporary visitors there, creates an acute sense of temporariness, which is intensified by the structure of the house itself and the fact that the most basic objects are shared among neighbours. Thus, several families cooperate so as not to waste money on utensils and property. What little they own is kept in purses and bags so that they can get organized and leave at a short notice.

*Work.* In the villages, men used to work in the fields, while women would be busy in the household, and this is how each family would support itself. At the compound most people do not work and live from the assistance of organizations active on site and from whatever they receive from their families in Israel. Those of the men who do work usually have jobs of two kinds. Either they have a permanent job, working on the compound as teachers, cooks, distributors of food, or they have a temporary job at construction sites, stone transporting, or wood felling. Often they get paid less than the locals.<sup>39</sup> The lack of regular employment makes the families especially dependent on external organizations and stifles their will to engage in normal everyday activities.

*Language.* The vast majority of “the waiting ones” come from villages where Amharic is spoken. There are a number of dialects in the villages. At the compound, members of the community find themselves immersed in a new dialect of the language – the so-called city dialect. There is a clear distinction between the language spoken by “the waiting ones,” which is usually a mixture of provincial Amharic dialects and the city dialect, and the language spoken by the city population. Sometimes it happens that within the same family, children and parents do not speak the same dialect.

---

<sup>39</sup> It should be pointed out that not only the residents of the compound suffer from unemployment – it is also a major problem for most of the people living in the city, as well as in Ethiopia in general. The situation at the compound is different in so far as the residents receive financial assistance from their families in Israel and are supported in their daily life by various organizations – which further nourishes their expectations and constantly reminds them of their special status in Gondar.

My father speaks the provincial dialect, but I grew up here and I speak a different kind of Amharic, and sometimes when my father wants to tell me something he tells me a story and then another story, and thus, indirectly, he tells me what he wants to tell me – this is a village custom... But here it is no longer done like that, here people do not tell so many stories, so I say ‘Father, just tell me what it is you want to tell me (...)’.<sup>40</sup>

*School.* Most of the children go to the *Beta Israel* school, while a minority goes to local schools. The community school is not recognized by the Ethiopian government, so that its graduates cannot continue their studies in a college or a university. In the community school children learn only Hebrew, Judaism and Amharic.<sup>41</sup> Some of the children who go to local schools conceal their Jewish identity: “I walk seven kilometers to school so that they won’t know I am Jewish”.<sup>42</sup> Despite their attempts teachers know who they are and consider them brilliant students: “The Falash pupils are the best. – How do you know? – They wouldn’t say they are Falash, but one can see... - And why are they the best students? – Because they are Jews, and they are waiting to immigrate to Israel, so they are preparing themselves...”.<sup>43</sup> Most of the young people prefer to study rather than getting married, as is usual in Ethiopia. “If I get married here, I will not be able to study in Israel” – they say, thus trying to combine the traditional Ethiopian lifestyle with the life that is waiting for them in Israel.

## Conclusion

Life at the compound combines village lifestyle with city life, both embedded in the prolonged waiting for immigration. The people arrived from village areas, from their own strictly defined cultural framework, to a city with a different culture. Still, they do not only

---

<sup>40</sup> Excerpt from an interview from 2005 with Yitzhak, who had been waiting eight years in Gondar.

<sup>41</sup> Previously, mathematics, physics and some other subjects were also taught there.

<sup>42</sup> Excerpt from an interview from 2007 with Gashau, who had been waiting nine years in Gondar.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with a teacher in a local school in Gondar, 2005.



have to cope with a new environment, but also to adjust to a compound that generates its own special laws, values and norms. This waiting period, in which people spend a lot of time “doing nothing”, creates a complex daily routine which brings together a mixture of hopes and expectations, dependence and tentativeness, and an overall anxiety bred out of the experience of belonging to “the waiting ones.” Moreover, the prolonged waiting, as well as having to abide by the rules of the compound, reinforce these people’s unstable status as human beings, refugees, and immigrants.

It is this hybrid status that defines the daily behaviour of the “waiting ones”, and it is this perception of themselves around which their identity comes to be structured for many years to come. “The waiting ones” are fighting for their “right to wait” as the only way out of the predicament in which they find themselves. They cannot go back to the villages they left, they do not want to be integrated into the life of the city as Christians, and the only choice they have is to wait. Thus, they live in a borderline condition, in a state of liminality, marginality, and non-belonging.

Such is the emotional baggage that many of the members of the *Zera Beta Israel* community bring with them to Israel. Their arrival in Israel is the final stage of an immigration process which more often than not has lasted many years. For these immigrants, it means a realization of their dream. Many of them come to Israel with expectations, hopes and dreams which are grounded in the desire to stop waiting, to be accepted, to come “home”, and to start leading a life of belonging, action and personal progress. Some of these dreams are realized; others are crushed. And maybe the main reason that some of these dreams are never realized is because the issues of their transitional and temporary status as new citizens and their complicated religious identity continues to preoccupy the members of the *Zera Beta Israel* community even after immigration to Israel. This is the issue that defines their communication with Israeli society, the government of Israel, the *Beta Israel* community, the authorities directly dealing with absorption of immigrants, and the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. In this sense, the ability of these people to finally escape one type of liminality, that of the compound, does not necessarily mean that they do not encounter a new one in Israel.

## Bibliography

- ARENDRT H., *The Human Condition*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958.
- BRETTELL C. and HOLLIFIELD J., *Migration Theory: Talking Across Disciplines*, New York, Routledge, 2000.
- BLOCH E., *The Principle of Hope*, Cambridge, MA, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1986.
- COHEN R., "Waiting on Their Way, (*Mengdachen Bgugut Yetbcal*)" *The Anthropology of Waiting: The Case of Zera Beita Israel (The Falashmora) in the Transition Camp in Gondar*, M.A. Thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2006. (in Hebrew)
- CORINALDI M., *The Enigma of Jewish Identity, The Law of Return Theory and Practice*, Jerusalem, Srigim Lion Press, 2001. (in Hebrew)
- CRAPANZANO V., *Serving the Word: Literalism in America from the Pulpit to the Bench*, New York, New York Press, 2000.
- EVANS-PRITCHARDE., *The Nuer: A Description of the modes of Livelihood and Political Institution of Nilotic People*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1940.
- GREEN L., "Fear as a Way of Life", *Cultural Anthropology*, 9, 2, 1994, 227-256.
- HAZAN H., *The Limbo People: A Study of the Constitution of the Time-World among the Aged*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980.
- KNUDSEN J., "Boat People in Transit: Vietnamese in Refugee Camp in the Philippines, Hong Kong and Japan", *Bergen Occasional Papers in Social Anthropology*, 31, University of Bergen, 1983.
- MALKKI L., *Purity and Exile Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- MESSING S.D., *The story of the Falashas: "Black Jews" of Ethiopia*, Brooklyn N.Y., Blashon, 1982.
- MINKOWSKI E., *Lived Time: Phenomenological and Psychopathological Studies*, Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 1970.
- MOLTMANN J., *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implication of a Christian Eschatology*, London, SCM Press, 1967.
- MURPHY H.B.M., *Flight and Resettlement*, Paris, Unesco, 1955.
- PAYNE E., *Ethiopian Jews: The Story of Mission*, London, Olive Prees, 1972.
- PETERSON W., "A General Typology of Migration", *American Sociological Review*, 23, 3, 1958, 256-266.

- QUIRIN J.A., *The Evolution of the Ethiopian Jews: A History of the Beta Israel (Falasha) to 1920*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992.
- SALAMON H., "Between Ethnicity and Religiosity: Internal Group Aspects of Conversion Among the Beta Israel in Ethiopia", *Pe'amim*, 58, 1994, 104-119. (in Hebrew)
- SEEMAN D., *One people, One Blood: Ethiopian Israelis and the Return to Judaism*, New Brunswick, New Jersey and London, Rutgers University Press, 2009.
- SHABTAY M., *The Zera Beta Israel - Ethiopian Jews, their Journey from Beta Israel to the Falashmora to Ethiopian Jews*, Jerusalem, Lashon Tsaha, 2006. (in Hebrew)
- SCHEPER-HUGHES N., *Death without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*, Berkely, University of California Press, 2004.
- SCHEPER-HUGHES N. and BOURGOIS P., *Violence in War and Peace*, Malden, MA, Blackwell, 1992.
- SPUNTA M., "The Left Side of Exile: The Dream of Tolerance in Francesca Duranti's *Sodni Mancini*", in OUDITT S. (ed.), *Displaced Persons: Conditions of Exile in European Culture*, Burlington, VT, Ashgate, 2002, 170-181.
- STEIN B.N., "The Refugee Experience: Defining the Parameters of a Field of Study", *International Migration Review*, 15, 1-2, 1981, 320-331.
- STILLWELL J. and CONGDON P., *Migration Models: Macro and Micro Approaches*, London, Belhaven Press, 1991.
- STOTLAND E., *The Psychology of Hope*, San Francisco, San Jossey Bass Inc, 1969.
- TADDESSE T., *Church and State in Ethiopia 1280-1527*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972.
- TURNER V., "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage", in TURNER V. (ed.), *The Forest of Symbols*, Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 1967, 93-111.
- WALDMAN M., *The Return to Judaism of the "Falasmura"*, Shvut Am Institute, Yemin Orde, 1995. (in Hebrew)
- WALDMAN M. and KIMCHI I., *Accountability team review of the conditions of the Falashmura's in Ethiopia*, Addis Abeba, Ethiopia, 1992. (in Hebrew)
- WEIL S., "Collective Designations and Collective Identity among Ethiopian Jews", *Israel Social Science Research*, 10, 2, 1995, 25-40.



THE *BEIT AVRAHAM* OF KECHENE:  
THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW JEWISH  
COMMUNITY IN ETHIOPIA<sup>1</sup>

*Edith Bruder, School of Oriental and African Studies,  
University of London, UK, and Centre National de Recherche  
Scientifique, Toulouse, France*

### **On the Formation of Identity**

The history of the *Beta-Israel*-Falasha community demonstrates that neither ethnicity nor caste and class was one-dimensional, static systems in Ethiopia, but were rather products of dynamic relationships. Groups and evolutionary societies who utilize diverse aspects of their identities in various circumstances exist in an alternative manner.<sup>2</sup> More fundamentally, a group like the *Beta Israel* may be seen to construct its own identity, although always catering to the fragmentary ideals and demands of the situation.<sup>3</sup> In this mix, Judaism and Christianity both enjoyed an important position in Ethiopia and have inter-reacted over many centuries to produce complex sequences of overlapping and interlocking cultures.

*Beta Israel*-Falasha self-identity and its relationship to the larger Ethiopian society have changed over the centuries. The recent works of historians state that from an obscure origin, the Falasha began to emerge as a distinct group by the fifteenth century through various mechanisms of differentiation and syncretism between ancient Judaism and Ethiopian Christianity.<sup>4</sup> Simultaneously with their development as

---

<sup>1</sup> This article was made possible thanks to the financial support of *Fondation du Judaïsme* and *Fondation Alain de Rothschild*, Paris, France.

<sup>2</sup> BATES 1983.

<sup>3</sup> QUIRIN 1992, 28.

<sup>4</sup> KAPLAN 1994, 645-658.

a recognizable ethnic group, they also evolved into a caste relationship with the dominant Ethiopian society. The process of their emergence remains unclear and controversial, but it involved both material and ideological elements.<sup>5</sup>

Nowadays in Ethiopia, a group of descendants of the craftsmen of the Shewa region appear to follow this paradigm and are experiencing a religious revival as Jews. This group, who call themselves the *Beit Avraham* (House of Abraham) claim Jewish heritage. Their position demonstrates the coming together of ethnicity, caste and class as factors explaining historical religious identity.

In February 2007, I collected oral information from the *Beit Avraham* society in their recently founded synagogue in Kechene, an area in the northern Shewa region,<sup>6</sup> south of the capital city of Addis Ababa.<sup>7</sup> The members of the community introduced themselves as the descendants of professional communities of craftsmen, known as the *Ballä Ejj*, i.e. workmen, who settled in the Shewa region from the seventeenth century up to the early nineteenth century. With the exception of one man who happened to be a weaver, all 27 members interviewed were not craftsmen. The *Beit Avraham* are active Westernized young men, who are highly educated and hold important social positions. Among them there was a banker, a camera-man, a university professor of mathematics, a biology professor, a socio-anthropologist, an English teacher, an accountant, and a painter; the women in the group had formerly worked as embroiderers. The dynamics of this group and the way they define themselves, even if they might be closely related to the Falasha through their history, have a number of obvious affinities with the Jewish African groups burgeoning presently in other parts of Africa that I have studied elsewhere.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> *Ivi*; ABBINK 1991.

<sup>6</sup> In general in this article I used the orthography of proper names as Shewa, Kechene, as they are used by the *Beta Avraham* themselves.

<sup>7</sup> My research was made possible by the kind cooperation of the members of the community and the invaluable assistance of my friend Dr Amakelech Teferi-Bel.

<sup>8</sup> BRUDER 2008, 135-173.

This article examines the emergence of a recent manifestation of Judaism in Ethiopia while the category “Ethiopian Jew” inaugurated by the *Beta Israel*-Falasha has been stabilized. It seeks to show how a similarity of social and cultural factors between the descendants of the Shewa craftsmen and the Falasha has led the descendants of the craftsmen to consider themselves – not implausibly – as a group of Jews adopting a Jewish identity. The article also considers how the *Beit Avraham*, situated on the edge of various religious traditions have associated their identification to Judaism and to the Jews of the Diaspora with the assistance of outsiders.

### **From *Ballä Ejj* to the Ethiopian North Shewa Zionist Organisation**

The *Beit Avraham* claim that there are thirty thousand people of the same origin in the area of Kechene and between fifty thousand and seventy thousand of them in the Shewa region. The past six years have seen a radical redefinition of their identity and in 2004, the members of the community created an organisation called the Ethiopian North Shewa Zionist Organisation. The members of the organisation assert that they

are the lost Tribes of Israel, black Jews living in North Shewa and the Kechene village. We were born with and have lived with suffering, persecution and discrimination. Over the past hundred years our families have suffered discrimination and death because they were Jewish. Our ancestors earned their living working as blacksmiths, weavers and potters, but other people consider us as animals. (...) We are the children of God, the tribes of Judah, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Our families practiced Judaism in secret in the forest, caves and remote desert parts of North Shewa. Because we hid ourselves in order to protect our generation from persecution and death and to safeguard the offspring of God's people, our identity would be lost and unknown by the Jewish community.

The aims of the organisation are the reunification with other Jews and to gain recognition from the rest of the Jewish world. The *Beit Avraham* assert that they have established the Ethiopian North Shewa Zionist Organisation, based on the belief of Zionism, “to emancipate our communities from suffering, persecution and discrimination and to walk together with our brothers in the world, to officially practice Judaism, to improve our living standards, to study Hebrew and history and to fulfil our Zionist dream with the help of God of Israel (*HaShem*).” They add that “We want to honour our forefathers who preserved their religious beliefs. We do not intend to leave Ethiopia but we would like to be recognised as Jews and have the freedom to be proud of our Jewish origins.” Although some of the informants consider that going to Israel is part of their destiny as a Jew, no *aliyah* (Hebrew: immigration) process has taken place within the community until today.

According to the tradition related by the *Beit Avraham* their forefathers were hidden Jews, probably Falasha, who lived originally in the Gondar region in northern Ethiopia in the seventeenth century and who later made their way to the Shewa region. My informants had collected data from many sources, and even if not always precise in chronology, they were acting as historians. The information provided contained different versions of extensive knowledge of oral traditions that had been collected previously about the Falasha.

Like the *Beta Israel*, the *Ballä Ejj* were craftsmen, mainly blacksmiths, weavers and potters and they lived as a separate caste apart from the population. Early seventeenth century evidence indicates that a large proportion of craftsmen were non-Christians many of whom were Falasha. From the sources gathered by Richard Pankhurst it appears that, in the past the craftsmen of the central Ethiopian region of Shewa constituted a class apart and that they had retained customs reminiscent of early Ethiopian Judaic Christianity.<sup>9</sup> They fulfilled in the Shewa region a role almost identical to that of the Falasha in the north with whom they present many similarities.

---

<sup>9</sup> PANKHURST 1995, 132-134.



In Ethiopia craftsmen supplied their neighbours as well as the State and Church with a variety of essential articles such as agricultural implements, knives, spearheads, woven cloth, jars, bowls, plates, etc. They have long played a major role in Ethiopian economic life, and more specifically in supplying tools and arms. However, despite its economic and military importance, craftsmanship was considered dishonourable, which meant that artisans were often viewed with distrust, fear and at times, even hatred. The blacksmiths were particularly regarded with suspicion and sometimes rejected by the rest of the community, and they tended to live in isolation.<sup>10</sup> They were segregated and traditionally considered as *buda* - those who possessed the evil eye.<sup>11</sup> The fact that they were object of superstitious prejudice prevented them from marrying people of other communities and they therefore tended to form a separate community. The traditions related by the *Beit Avraham* assert that their forefathers experienced dispersion, loss of land and persecution and emphasised that up to now their community has continued to suffer from discrimination due to their ancestors' activities. In considering the prejudice against their forefathers in the context of a "persecuted Jews" perspective, they wish to constitute a link between *Beit Avraham* history and that of other Jewish communities. Viewed in this manner, their story validates the central teachings of both Judaism and Zionism.

As non-Christians, the Falasha were denied the right to own land and as a consequence they were forced to find work elsewhere in the country.<sup>12</sup> It is known that craftsmen were engaged in military campaigns which would also explain their mobility.<sup>13</sup> The blacksmiths suffered persecution more than the others and this may have been a further factor causing them to travel extensively.<sup>14</sup> This led to the setting up of communities of craftsmen in many geographically dispersed parts of the country with their own mode of life and religious beliefs. This is reported by the French Orientalist Arnaud d'Abbadie who travelled

---

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>11</sup> QUIRIN 1992, 141-145.

<sup>12</sup> KAPLAN 1994, 647.

<sup>13</sup> PANKHURST 1995, 135.

<sup>14</sup> LUDOLF 1682, 390-391; BECKINGHAM and HUNTINGFORD 1954, 54-55.

12 years in Ethiopia in the mid-nineteenth century and observed that craftsmen were used to looking for work in various parts of the country, sometimes on their own initiative and sometimes engaged by Kings in their armies and on military expeditions.<sup>15</sup> In many cases they travelled and established new villages with their own customs and religious beliefs throughout the entire country. Nowadays, the *Beit Avraham* assert that one of their forefathers' first settlements was in Morät, which is to this day reckoned as a crafts centre.

The *Beit Avraham* claim that their Falasha forefathers were later converted en masse to Christianity, but despite conversion maintained their Judaic practices.<sup>16</sup> It is well known that within the groups of Falasha, some continued their religious practices while many others converted to Christianity though still persevering in their old religious Judaic beliefs. According to Telles, many Falasha converts lived in the province of Dämbeya where they continued to practice their crafts.<sup>17</sup> In early twentieth century accounts, craftsmen of Shewa claimed that they originated from Dämbeya and it is known that many conversions had taken place there. Confirmation of a possible Falasha origin of the *Ballä Ejj* craftsmen of Shewa can be found out in the accounts collected by Jacques Faitlovitch in 1908. Basing his argument on interviews, Faitlovitch asserted that "they came from the province of Dämbeya" and that "they appear to have settled in Shewa with Nagassi.... (who)....had given them many pieces of land."<sup>18</sup> Such evidence, though far from conclusive, provides a possible explanation for the *Ballä Ejj* phenomenon we are examining today and a plausible common origin of *Ballä Ejj* and Falasha.

Oral traditions point to a major craftsmen's role in the settlement and the development of the Shewa region from the eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup> Specifically blacksmiths appeared to have a significant role in the production of tools for ploughing and tree felling. According to these traditions, Falasha Jews served the

---

<sup>15</sup> D'ABBADIE 1980, 165.

<sup>16</sup> PANKHURST 1995, 149-150.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>18</sup> FAITLOVITCH 1910, 138.

<sup>19</sup> LEVINE 1965, 32-35.

dynasty of Abeto Nägassi (1692-1703) – who began a new dynasty reigning over the Shewa – and his successors, Märidazmach Sebesté (1705-1720) and Märidazmach Abbiyé (1720-1745). The traditional Ethiopian historian Alaqä Asmé observed: “Many Falasha Jews entered his service – [the service of Abeto Nägassi]. No one served him as much as they did. They made him axes, chisels, and sickles with which he exploited the forests of Yefat. They made ploughshares, hoes and *Wägal*. He began to plough with these tools”.<sup>20</sup>

Nowadays, the *Beit Avraham* describe how their forefathers were forcibly converted to the Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity and explain that many traces of Jewish religious tradition can be found in their practice. According to oral tradition, their forefathers did not work, travel, nor light fires or prepare food on Saturdays. They were also stricter than most Orthodox Christians in their adherence to the Judaic precepts of ritual purity. The women of the community used to prepare the food during the daylight hours of Friday and ate it cold on Friday nights and on Saturdays. Circumcision was performed on a child’s eighth day, lamb’s blood was smeared on doorposts during Passover, and marriage to outsiders was forbidden. During childbirth and menstruation, *Ballä Ejj* women, like Falasha women were not allowed to have contact with the rest of the community and were kept in separate huts. In addition, they were confined in a separate house for seven days after the birth of a son, or nine days after that of a daughter. Menstruating women could only reintegrate into the community after carrying out ritual cleansing on the fourth and seventh day of their cycle. Like the Falasha, ritual cleansing was also undergone by community members after coming into contact with outsiders.<sup>21</sup>

The *Ballä Ejj* strict adherence to the Judaic precepts of ritual purity manifests itself through consumption rituals, with certain pots assigned for animal products and others for vegetable and cereals eaten during periods of abstinence from meat. Distinctive funeral rites were carried out even when the burial took place in an Orthodox Christian

---

<sup>20</sup> TAFLA 1987, 135.

<sup>21</sup> PANKHURST 1995, 142.

cemetery. The corpse, after been washed and sealed with cotton, was wrapped in a shroud.

The informants assert that, despite their conversion, their forefathers continued to secretly practice their former Judaic rituals in countryside *gädams* or monasteries. The existence of these monasteries that are said to have been founded “a thousand years” earlier appear to be of major importance for the *Beit Avraham*. Community members shared stories of their parents attending church and following the major Ethiopian Orthodox Church festivals, but also observing *Shabbat* and other practices in secret in the monasteries. According to the *Beit Avraham* the monasteries Mugär, Yälema and Mänteq, where their parents took them, were the centre of Judaic tradition. They described these monasteries as located either in ravines, in caves or on cliffs. The *gädams* were first described in the nineteenth century by foreign travellers who established that craftsmen of Shewa had their own distinctive religious organisation based on monastic traditions. At least 15 craftsmen’s monasteries are known to exist to this day and they are still inhabited by monks and nuns. The German Protestant missionary Krapf was the first to note in his diary on July, 6, 1839, that craftsmen were organised in *gädams*. He observed that people who inhabited these monasteries were known as *Tabiban* (*täbib* means literally craftsmen), and he reported that the Shewans were “in great fear of them” just as the Amharas to the north who considered the Falasha as “sorcerers.”<sup>22</sup> After having visited a Tabiban monastery, the missionary reported that the Tabiban’s book he saw consisted of the Organon Maryam and the Melkä Maryam and some parts of the Bible. He asserted that “all were written in Aethiopic” and that they had no book written in another language. The missionary emphasised that the inmates were “very proud of praising their religious rigidity” and that they fasted “everyday except on Saturday and Sunday.” Examining their religious status, Krapf who on first hearing about them had assumed that “they were Jews, of the sect of the Falashas” concluded:

---

<sup>22</sup> ISENBERG and KRAPF 1843, 74.

Outwardly they are Christians, as they go to the Church of the Christians; their children are baptized, and they have the books of the Abyssinians; but they are strongly suspected of being Jews. They told me that if I had come on Saturday, they would not have received me, as on that day they neither go out of their houses nor kindle fires. Their fathers, they said, came from Geshen, in the north of Shoa. I could not learn anything further from them.<sup>23</sup>

These monasteries later attracted considerable interest from subsequent foreign travellers who were doubtful whether their members were Christians or Falasha and who were undoubtedly influential shapers of their image. The British Captain W.C. Harris who resided in Shewa in 1841 to 1843 declared that the monasteries were “solely inhabited by Tabeban – men strongly suspected of being Jews in disguise – cunning workers in iron, wood and clay”, who were “regarded as sorcerers”.<sup>24</sup> A little later, the British surgeon Charles Johnson who travelled in Shewa in 1842-1843 reported that they “are Christians, but do not pray to the virgin Mary and believe that Christ had no father...they have no *tabot* [symbolic representation of Ark of Covenant], or movable altar, like the other Christians” and he concluded that he could in fact “make nothing of them” and even wondered whether they might be Jews or Freemasons.<sup>25</sup>

Nowadays the *Beit Avraham* are proud to stress that in the *gädams* the discipline is austere. The monks and nuns hold secret their religion and religiously guard all knowledge concerning it from “unclean people” - anyone not a *Beit Avraham*. Widely influenced by the narratives of Western historical literature on monasteries, the *Beit Avraham* describe how the monks used to wear neck-cords (in fact like other Ethiopian Christians) and slept in an upright position, being secured from falling by straps fastened to the walls. Monasteries are described as divided into two parts under the authority of two superiors, an aged monk and an aged nun. One side is occupied by the women and the other by the men with no communication permitted between

---

<sup>23</sup> PANKHURST 1993, 494.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 493.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 492-493.

them. Monks and nuns eat and drink together once a day and as they were skilful in many things - working in iron and clay - they used to work as did other people of the Shewa region.

The craftsmen's monasteries appear to be the *Beit Avraham's* locus of Jewish identity. They served not only as religious centres for the monks and nuns but also as places of worship and congregation for secular members of the *Ballä Ejj* community and as centres of pilgrimage. The married people could visit relations there but were not allowed to live among the monks, while lay members could claim admission when getting old. The *Beit Avraham* assert that "when the members of the community went there, they had the feeling of being a unique people whom were able to continue practicing their ancient religious beliefs". They add that: "The monks knew the Secret. The oldest members of the community went to spend their last days in dignity in the monasteries. When somebody was about to die, the monk visited him and told him some special words. If the monk did not have time enough to tell him, it meant that the person was considered to be unworthy and did not deserve to know the Secret." Thus a "closed" system was maintained against the outside world.

Contacts between the craftsmen and the State appear to start with King Sahlä Sellassé (1813-1847) who had considerable interest in technology and required the services of blacksmiths, weavers and other craftsmen of the Shewa capital Ankobär. Because of their skills, some of them had fine workshops that supplied the monarch and his followers with a wide range of articles.<sup>26</sup> These included weapons and agricultural implements as well as clothing and plates used for the baking of *enjära*. These contacts are said to have also been important during the reign of Emperor Menelik (1844-1913), and according to Faitlovitch some craftsmen held respected positions there.<sup>27</sup> From this time, it seems that in return, the relations with the rulers assured the craftsmen security and protection concerning the prejudices against their type of labour.

---

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 487-498.

<sup>27</sup> FAITLOVITCH 1910, 136.

In the late nineteenth century, with the move of the Shewa capital from Anköbar to Addis, the resultant growth of an expanded market led to a change of occupation on the part of some of the craftsmen of Shewa. From their former settlements in northern Shewa, many craftsmen made their way to the new city. They were allocated land by the State, near the Kechene River, to the north or north-east of the capital. As a result of this geographical move and the general development of the local economy, members of the community moved into other occupations, notably trade. For instance, as many blacksmiths had the necessary skills they were able to adopt new crafts such as making jewellery. Weavers, who sometimes had to travel great distances in order to sell their products, became itinerant traders, selling not only cloth, but many other kinds of products. Masons, blacksmiths and carpenters were employed by the Emperor Hailé Sélassié in building work at Addis Aläm west of the capital and it is claimed that this privileged relationship existed because the Emperor was a secret member of a craftsmen's association (*mähäbar*) which met on a monthly basis on *Sabbath*.<sup>28</sup> The migration of craftsmen from northern Shewa is said to have also included a number of Falasha who were said to live in both areas in the nineteenth and twentieth century. According to Faitlovitch these Falasha consisted in 1908 of 50 to 60 families.<sup>29</sup>

In the twentieth century, the craftsmen of Shewa were still constituted as a separate class and were sometimes regarded as a variety of Falasha amongst the Ethiopian people. For instance the Ethiopian author Aläqua Asmé wrote that the "Falashas of Shewa" were "a monkish order" with "44 monasteries" who practiced baptism, prayed in "different languages" and did not resume work until Sunday because they combined Judaic law with the Christian Gospel.<sup>30</sup>

Faitlovitch personally believed them to be Falasha though he admits they insisted on calling themselves Christians, "lived as such and did not want to be anything else." They nevertheless confirmed that they strictly adhered to *Sabbath*, had special huts for women

---

<sup>28</sup> PANKHURST 1995, 141.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 134; BEKE 1844.

<sup>30</sup> TAFLA 1987, 391.

during menstruation, practiced ritual cleansing after menstruation and carried out circumcision on the eighth day.<sup>31</sup> The French linguist Marcel Cohen who travelled to northern Shewa in 1910-1911 and visited the craftsmen *gädam* at Let Maräfeya believed at first that he was going to meet Falasha. He encountered two old monks in an empty monastery and some lay men and women working as potters. One monk, when questioned, claimed that his community celebrated all the Christian feasts and buried their dead with Christians but did not however deny that his people had a different faith. From this, he concluded that they tended “to hide more or less their orthodoxy” and that their “Judaism were much less pure than that of the Falasha of the north of Ethiopia.”<sup>32</sup>

Over the last fifteen years, the *Beit Avraham* have decided to return to “the traditions of their forefathers” while adopting a Jewish identity. Some of the reasons of their Jewish revival, as claimed by the informants, are linked to social-economical reasons. Previously, their forefathers and parents did not use to work on Saturday and they used to sell their wares during the week “close to the Church” – probably the Madhane Alam church in the Kechene area. Following a new regulation obliging the traders to sell inside the *Mercato*, which is open on Saturday, the new generation of the craftsmen’s descendants are obliged to work on Saturdays and so fear for the disappearance of their traditions. Moreover, as the youngest were excluded from the practice of their parents’ hidden Judaism, they could become influenced by other religions. The *Beit Avraham* leaders seem particularly to fear the influence of Protestant Churches that may undermine their Judaic customs. In the present political climate allowing the freedom of worship, the *Beit Avraham* wish to appropriate their Jewish religious heritage. It is interesting to point out that, since they have openly claimed Jewish identity and have created the Ethiopian North Shewa Zionist Organisation, there is a division within the craftsmen community. The informants reported that the *Ballä Ejj* elders “who want to remain secret” disagreed with the position taken by the *Beit Avraham*. In February 2007, they organised meetings to discuss these

---

<sup>31</sup> FAITLOVITCH 1910, 136-138.

<sup>32</sup> COHEN 1912, 36-38.



differences. What is not clear is if this conflict concerned the Jewish religious identity proclaimed by the *Beit Avraham* or the preservation of the community's basic values of secrecy.

Indeed, the *Beit Avraham* have been directly influenced by the existence of the Falasha. Up until the recent past, the *Beit Avraham* had little knowledge of Jewish rites and feasts. To gain information about Judaism they first underwent - contacting the "upper area's *Beta Israel*" - the Falasha who settled on their way to Israel close to the Israeli embassy in Addis Ababa. In 2005, Mesfin Assefa, the president of the Ethiopian North Shewa Zionist organisation contacted the prominent American-based *Kulanu* (i.e., "All of Us" in Hebrew) that has undertaken in Africa and elsewhere in the world a variety of activities on behalf of marginal Jewish groups, bringing them closer together and closer to mainstream Judaism. President Jack Zeller immediately forwarded Mesfin's message to Sam Taddesse, *Kulanu*'s co-coordinator for Ethiopian Jewry and channels were opened. In 2006, Amy Cowen, an American journalist and photographer, visited the *Beit Avraham* and wrote an article in *Jewish Quarterly*, introducing them as "another Jewish community still hidden in Ethiopia's highlands."<sup>33</sup> Since then they have had contact with Jewish communities who send them prayer books translated into Amharic as well as *talith*; they are also following the integration process of newly born Jewish communities. About 60 people attend the synagogue in Kechene for *Shabbat* that up to now does not have *Sepher Torah*. The *Beit Avraham* pray in Amharic, although some of them have learnt Hebrew and they follow all the Jewish festivals.

## Discussion

In fact, the *Ballä Ejj* community appears as an ancient professional caste with an inferior status having both Christian beliefs and Hebraic-Judaic features.<sup>34</sup> *Ballä Ejj* customs are in several notable ways

---

<sup>33</sup> COWEN 2006.

<sup>34</sup> Cfr. ULLENDORF 1956, 225.

closely related to those of the Jews, but they are also similar to those of early Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and members of the Falasha community.

*Ballä Ejj* are Christians, baptised into the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and at the same time adherents of their own specific Hebraic-Judaic-Christian cult grounded in Old Testament traditions. Members of the community celebrate the Christians festivals – notably *Temqät*, i.e. the Epiphany and *Fasika*, i.e. Easter – and strictly follow the Lenten and other fasts of Ethiopian Orthodox Church.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, they share with Orthodox Christians, Falasha and Quemants various taboos in relation with child-birth and menstruation.<sup>36</sup> Though buried in Orthodox Christian grounds, members of the community have their own distinctive funeral rites and commemorations for the dead that are held, like Orthodox Christians and Falasha, forty days after death.<sup>37</sup> As seen before, they also have their own distinctive religious organisation, based on *gädams*, but they have no priests or *däbtäras* i.e. scribes, like Orthodox Christians and Falasha. Perhaps the most visible “Judaic” or Old Testament feature of the *Ballä Ejj* is to be seen in the matter of *Sabbath* observance.<sup>38</sup> Like the Falasha, from sundown on Friday to Saturday evening they abstain from working, lighting fires, cooking or travelling.

However, if the craftsmen of Shewa were nothing more than a cast in Ethiopian society, why would have they their own specific clergy? We are thus left with the possibility that the *Beit Avraham* are either descendants of a distinct group of Falasha that split apart or that they are descendants of an ethnic and religious caste with its own specific Judaic-Christian cult or descendants of some combination of the two.

Nowadays, the *Beit Avraham* assert, not implausibly, that they show some of the immediately recognizable aspects of Falasha group identity, even if they have come together to form a recognisable group with an identity distinct from the Falasha. In respect to their emergence

---

<sup>35</sup> PANKHURST 1995, 141.

<sup>36</sup> GAMST 1969, 99.

<sup>37</sup> PANKHURST 1995, 143.

<sup>38</sup> Older generation of Orthodox Christians observe the Friday evening to Saturday *Sabbath*.

as a separate community, another perspective in *Ballä Ejj* identity – as descendants of an autonomous group – must be considered. We know that between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, small groups of *ayhud*<sup>39</sup> living in north western Ethiopia resisted conversion and sporadically rebelled.<sup>40</sup> The *ayhud* remained faithful to a Judaized form of religion following the arrival of Christianity and at various historical periods of intensive proselytization, they resisted conversion.<sup>41</sup> The dual processes of political and religious pressures reinforced the *ayhud* characteristic of their society, while some Christian dissidents joined *ayhud* communities bringing with them important religious elements such as the practice of monasticism.<sup>42</sup> Through this melange of pre-existing *ayhud* groups and new influences from Orthodoxy, the emergence of the *ayhud* as a distinctive people was the product of a variety of political, economic and ideological processes. The rise of the Solomonic dynasty beginning in 1270 and its subsequent expansion throughout the Ethiopian highlands placed the *ayhud* of the Lake Tana region, as well as many autonomous groups in a difficult economic position.<sup>43</sup> As non Christians, the *ayhud* were denied land rights, and through conflict with the Christian church and state were possibly obliged to take up crafts. Thus the religious and regional basis for their identification were completed and further defined by an occupational distinction. In that social position they were similar to other people such as the Quemant, Muslims and slaves of various origins: each group held itself apart from the others and were both peripheral and essential to Ethiopian society. The continued social separation of the *ayhud*-Falasha groups from the main stream Abyssinian society can be explained by material and ideological factors associated with the caste formation process.<sup>44</sup> Over the centuries there emerged clear and rigid rules of social separation and both sides formulated their

---

<sup>39</sup> *Ayhud* in Geez literally means Jews, but was generally used to refer to Christian heretics or other political or religious deviants.

<sup>40</sup> KAPLAN 1994, 647; QUIRIN 1992, 41.

<sup>41</sup> QUIRIN 1992, 40-88.

<sup>42</sup> *Ivi.*

<sup>43</sup> TAMRAT 1972.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31.

own rules. This resulted in the formation of the Falasha groups out of some pre-existing *ayhud* groups in north western Ethiopia between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>45</sup>

The *Gadla Zena Marqos* carried out by the monk Zena Marqos in fourteenth-century Shewa gives detailed accounts of the presence of *ayhud* in the Shewa region.<sup>46</sup> The *Gadla* mentions peaceful evangelization among the Shewan *ayhud* and contains detailed contemporary accounts of *ayhud* history and religion in the region. It sees them as a distinctive Old Testament community that were said to have arrived in Ethiopia in the reign of *Ebna Hakim* (Menilek I), who knew well the “law of the Orit” but did not believe in the birth of Christ from Mary until convinced by Zena Marqos. Their centre was certainly in the western Begamder-Samen-Tigray area, but apparently some numbers lived elsewhere. Between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries there was a clear evolution of the use of the terms from *ayhud* to Falasha which were used interchangeably in Christian written sources, with the preference eventually moving towards Falasha.<sup>47</sup>

The craftsmen’s communities’ travellers found in nineteenth-century Shewa and viewed as Falasha may have been the remnants of these ancient *ayhud*, as well as the result of subsequent dispersal to the region. This connection does not mean that all *ayhud* became or were the same as the Falasha and did not indicate automatically the complete social assimilation of the two groups. However, the *ayhud*-Falasha identity may well have continued to evolve with a similarity of culture. Due to a lack of sources, this remains unclear. The evidence currently available to us suggests that the origins of the *Beit Avraham* go back to those *ayhud* who found themselves excluded during the initial stages of the establishment of the Ethiopian feudal society.

---

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-42 ; KAPLAN 1994, 647.

<sup>46</sup> Zena Marqos was a nephew of King Yekunno Amlak (1270-1285). QUIRIN 1992, 48 fully recognized the significance of the *Gadla Zena Marqos* that was not followed by other scholars.

<sup>47</sup> In addition, *Kayla* was also used to refer to the Falasha at that time. *Ibid.*, 11-15.

## Bibliography

- ABBINK J., “Mytho- légendes et histoire: l’énigme de l’ethnogenèse des Beta Esra’el”, *Les Cahiers du CEDAF 3*, Bruxelles, Centre d’Etude et de Documentation africaines, 1991.
- BATES R., “Modernization, Ethnic Competition and the Rationality of Politics in Contemporary Africa”, in ROTHCHILD D. and OLURUNSOLA V. (eds.), *State versus Ethnic Claims: African Policies Dilemmas*, Boulder: Co: Westview Press, 1983, 153-167.
- BECKINGHAM C.F. and HUNTINGFORD G.W.B., *Some Records of Ethiopia*, London, Hakluyt Society, 1954.
- BEKE C., “Abyssinia - being a Continuation of Routes in that Country”, *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, 14, 1844, 8-56.
- BRUDER E., *The Black Jews of Africa: History, Identity, Religion*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2008.
- COHEN M., *Rapport sur une mission linguistique en Abyssinie (1910-1911)*, Paris, Imprimerie Nationale, 1912.
- COWEN A., “The Long Road Home”, *Jewish Quarterly*, 201, Spring 2006, 35-36.
- D’ABBADIE A., *Douze ans de séjour dans la Haute-Ethiopie, Abbyssinie*, Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca apostolica vaticana, 1980.
- FAITLOVITCH J., *Quer durch Abessinen: Meine zweite Reise zu den Falashas*, Berlin, Poppelauer, 1910.
- GAMST F., *The Qemant, A Pagan-Hebraic Peasantry of Ethiopia*, Prosper Heights, Illinois, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969.
- ISENBERG K.W. and KRAPF J.L., *Journals of the Rev. Isenberg and Krapf*, London, Seeley and Burnside, 1843.
- KAPLAN S., *The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia: From Earliest Times to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, New York, N.Y. University Press, 1992.
- KAPLAN S., “The Invention of Ethiopian Jews: Three Models”, *Cahiers d’études africaines*, 132, 33, 1994, 645-658.
- LEVINE D.L., *Wax and Gold. Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1965.
- LUDOLF H., *A New History of Ethiopia*, London, A. Godbid and J. Playford, 1682.
- PANKHURST R., “The Craftsmen’s Monasteries of Shawa and their Judaeo-Christian customs: A review of the Literature”, *Church and Theology*, 12, 1993, 492-494.
- PANKHURST R., “The Ballä Ejj community of Shāwa”, in KAPLAN S. et

- Al. (eds.), *Between Africa and Zion: Proceedings of the First International Congress of the Society for the Study of Ethiopian Jewry*, Jerusalem, 1995, 131-152.
- QUIRIN J., *The Evolution of the Ethiopian Jews: A History of Beta Israel (Falasha) to 1920*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Press, 1992.
- TAFLAB., *Asma Gyorgis and His Work: History of the Gällā and the kingdom of Šawā*, Stuttgart, Franz Steiner, 1987.
- TAMRAT T., *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972.
- ULLENDORFF E., "Hebraic-Jewish Elements in Abyssinian (Monophysite) Christianity", *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 1, 1956, 216-225.



Stampato in Italia  
presso Laser Copy S.r.l.,  
via Livraghi 1, Milano  
*febbraio* 2011