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More Ethiopian Jews Set Sights on Israel

Photo caption: Ethiopian Falash Mura men sing during morning prayers at a transit camp in Addis Ababa. Photo Courtesy: AP Photo/Eyal Warshavsky

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On April 11, the Israeli Minister of Interior Natan Sharansky returned from Ethiopia, where he had traveled to examine the claims of some 26,000 Ethiopians belonging to the Falash Mura community, who say they are Jewish and want to immigrate to Israel. Under Israel's Law of Return, Jews anywhere in the world have the right to make *aliyah* (ascent) to Israel and claim Israeli citizenship, and during Operation Moses of 1984 and Operation Solomon of 1991, about 35,000 Ethiopian Jews were airlifted to Israel. Although the Falash Mura currently assert a Jewish identity, their ancestors converted to Christianity about a century ago, and they have not been readily welcomed in Israel. The debate over the Jewishness of the Falash Mura has sparked a spirited discussion in Israel over Jewish identity, the Law of Return, and racism.

Jews have inhabited Ethiopia for thousands of years, and are said in one myth to have arrived from Yemen. It was only in 1984, when a devastating famine struck the East African country, that the Falashas (as Ethiopian Jews were commonly called), gained the world's attention and 15,000 of them were airlifted to Israel in Operation Moses. (The term "Falasha," which means "invader" in Amharic, is now considered derogatory, and the preferred term is "Beta Israel.") Operation Solomon followed in 1991, transporting 20,000 Jews to Israel. But two groups were left behind, the Jews of Quara and the Falash Mura. The Jews from Quara, who missed the opportunities to immigrate because of the remoteness and isolation of their homeland, have been recognized as Jews by Israel and have been slowly trickling into the Promised Land. The Falash Mura have practiced Christianity for the past one hundred years (one account claims their ancestors were forced to convert to Christianity by the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian state) but have maintained some Jewish traditions and

increasingly celebrate their Jewish heritage. However, they have never been fully recognized as Jews by the Israeli government. Recent lobbying by American Jewish organizations and Israeli human rights groups, plus the looming humanitarian tragedy in Ethiopia, where another famine is predicted, have placed the Falash Mura question on the Israeli political agenda and prompted Sharansky's trip.

Sharansky, who was detained in a Soviet prison for helping Soviet Jews immigrate to Israel, toured the camps around the Israeli embassy in Addis Ababa, where some 18,000 hopeful Falash Mura have been living in squalor for two years; the Israeli daily *Haaretz* reported that "sanitary conditions are pitiful. Last winter about five children a day died and they were buried in the backyards of the huts."

Sharansky also traveled to the northern city of Gondar, visiting compounds where Falash Mura demonstrated their attachment to Judaism for the Israeli minister. According to the *New York Times*, "Women who have crosses tattooed on their foreheads as is customary in Ethiopian villages, baked matzah...while children sang Hebrew songs and knitted ritual prayer fringes." Falash Mura leaders told Sharansky in an emotional letter, "We dream of Jerusalem and ask that as Moses led the people of Israel, you will bring us to Israel before Passover."

Sharansky was moved by what he saw. "I knew the situation was difficult, but to see the suffering close-up is a difficult experience which can leave no one unmoved," he said. But the minister added, "Suffering doesn't make someone Jewish." Twenty-five Falash Mura were deemed eligible for aliyah, and traveled to Israel with the minister, but he told the remaining Falash Mura that not all could be brought to Israel on the basis of hardship, for that would flood Israel with immigration requests from other poor countries.

Advocates for the 60,000-strong Ethiopian community in Israel have accused Sharansky of discriminating against the Falash Mura. Critics say that Sharansky's approval of aliyah for hundreds of thousands of Jews (and, according to some, non-Jews) from the former Soviet Union but his refusal to welcome more Ethiopians is evidence of a double standard.

"This issue has no connection to religion. The Falash Mura are black, and race is the defining category here," says Moshe Behar, an Israeli political scientist at Columbia University and member of the Mizrahi (Sephardic) Democratic Rainbow, a non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting the culture and political interests of non-European Jews. "In the early '90s, Yair Tshban, then Minister of Absorption, formed a committee to determine the authenticity of the Falash Mura. But no committees were set up to investigate the Russian Jews. And now everyone knows that at least half of the so-called 'Russian Jews' are not Jews. There is a double standard operating here because the Falash Mura are black. This issue reveals the contradiction existing within Zionism. Fundamentally, however, this issue is not about Jewishness, mythologies of origin or identity, but a simple First World-Third World dynamic -- it's about people from the Third World trying to migrate to the First World."

At the close of his Ethiopian visit, Sharansky said, "the problem of the Falash Mura is a difficult humanitarian problem that must be solved quickly." But in a statement released by the Ministry of Interior, Sharansky also stated that Israel was facing "a critical moment, with pressures regarding the Law of Return. On the one hand, there are demands to tighten the law in light of the number of non-Jews arriving in Israel from Russia, while on the other, there are demands to expand the Law due to

the situation Ethiopia." Sharansky also declared, "The problem of the Falash Mura must be solved humanely, but the issue must not be entangled with the Law of Return." He estimated that only 30 percent (nearly 8,000) of the applicants would be recognized as eligible candidates for immigration. The Jewish Agency, an American foundation, places the percentage even lower, estimating that only 5,000 of the 26,000 Falash Mura would be eligible.

Upon returning to Israel, Sharansky announced that Israel would begin examining the claims of the Falash Mura on an individual basis, according to two criteria: the Law of Return, which grants every Jew automatic Israeli citizenship (and would involve an evaluation of the "Jewishness" of individual applicants), and the Law of Entry, designed to facilitate immigration to reunite families (usually first degree kin) – some Falash Mura claim that some family members made it to Israel in the airlifts of 1984 and 1991, which, according to the Law of Entry, would make them eligible to immigrate to Israel to join their family members. To expedite the examination procedures, the Minister also said requests for immigration could now be submitted directly to the Israeli Embassy in Ethiopia instead of being mailed to Israel. Sharansky also promised to request funds from the Ministry of Finance to hire more personnel both in Ethiopia and Israel.

The Falash Mura issue touches on complex legal questions, regarding Israel's rabbinical (Halakic) law and secular legal code. The two legal systems have different perspectives on the Falash Mura. As Itai Sneh, an Israeli legal expert and scholar of human rights at Columbia University explains, "The Israeli legal definition of Jewishness follows the definition of the Nuremberg Law of 1935, which said that if one of your four grandparents was Jewish, you're Jewish. That is, if you're Jewish enough to be killed, you're Jewish enough to be saved by Israel. However, if you convert out of Judaism, you're out -- which makes the Falash Mura ineligible." Under rabbinical law, on the other hand, Falash Mura who undergo Jewish conversion could become eligible to immigrate to Israel. "Under religious Halakic law, if you're born a Jew, you die a Jew. If your mother is Jewish, or you convert through orthodox law, then you're Jewish," Sneh says. "So Halakic law could possibly recognize at least some of the Falash Mura."

Israel's Chief Rabbinate initially accepted the Falash Mura's Jewishness, and said that although they "cannot be considered fully assimilated Jews," they would not require conversion, but would need to go through a procedure of

"returning to their Jewish roots" -- which in the past has meant undergoing "re-education programs." Recently, however, the Chief Rabbinate changed its position and called for the Falash Mura's full conversion to Judaism.

The 60,000 Ethiopian Jews currently living in Israel have found it difficult to assimilate and adjust to life in the Promised Land. Bureaucratic delays and housing shortages kept many of the Beta Israel living in the camps and "absorption centers" where they were initially housed. A report released last year by Refugees International said the Beta Israel are "no longer viewed as a curiosity, but as a familiar part of Israel's ethnic mosaic," but many observers claim that Ethiopians in Israel continue to suffer racial discrimination. Critics point to the high rates of poverty and suicide among the Beta Israel, and the discrimination they experience from other non-European Jews of similar socioeconomic stature, and, as Behar says, "from middle- and upper-class Israelis, who don't want Ethiopian neighbors, because it will bring down the value of their real estate."

Israel has had its history with racial conflict. In the 1970s, non-European Jews who felt that they were discriminated against by an Ashkenazi hierarchy ("Ashkenazi" refers to Jews of European origin) launched a protest movement which found expression in groups such as an Israeli version of the Black Panthers. In 1971, the Israeli Black Panthers led a large-scale and often violent movement calling for the rights of the oppressed without regard to origin. The Panthers, children of Sephardic immigrants mostly from Morocco, borrowed their name from the African American Black Panther Party, because, according to one analyst, of "the important resonances it would have in Israeli society. Aside from the alleged anti-Semitism of which the American group was accused by Israel and the American-Jewish establishment, the projection of the image of Israeli Jews as an ethnically divided society at war with itself jolted an image-conscious Israel." The Panthers protested state discrimination and maltreatment, and called for the elimination of slums, free education and housing for the needy, and full Sephardic representation in state institutions, and in public rallies referred to Ashkenazi leaders as "Ashke-Nazis." The Israeli press described the Black Panthers as "violence-prone Moroccans" suffering from "neurosis" and "maladjustment." Prime Minister Golda Meir complained that the Black Panthers "were not nice kids" and sent the police to suppress their demonstrations.

Many Israelis who welcome the immigration of the Falash Mura resent the charges of racism. One editorialist writing in *Haaretz* recently argued, "the blackening of Israel's name by various American Jewish groups in our dealing with the Falash Mura is unfair. No other country in the Western world has, on its own initiative and within a period of less than 20 years, absorbed dark-skinned immigrants who constitute more than one percent of that country's population. The Falash Mura issue is too complicated for sloganeering demagogues. I advise the few American Jews who have a complex about their relationship with blacks in their own country not to project their complexes onto Israeli society."

Sneh disagrees. "Sadly, issues of discrimination and parochialism are at stake here," he says. "Ethiopian Jews are seen as primitive, not real Jews because of their skin color. They're often seen as expendable, lacking social and technical skills, and occupy the bottom of the social ladder." The real problem, adds Sneh, "is that the Ethiopians have no political backbone, no political muscle, while the Russian Jews have two political parties -- Israeli B'aliyah (Sharansky's party) and Israel Beitinu -- because of their education and sheer numbers. And since Sharansky was head of a Russian Jewish party, whatever he does with the Ethiopian Jews has great implications.

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