

## Changing of the Guards: Leadership Among Ethiopian Jews in Israel

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**ABSTRACT** The paper discusses representations of Ethiopian Jewish leadership after their migration since the 1970's to Israel. It shows how Ethiopian Jews were organised in Ethiopia, and the nature of the leadership they have in Israel. It examines the premise of the "changing of the guards", namely, that Ethiopian Jewish religious leadership from Ethiopia has been replaced by Ethiopian Jewish secular leadership in Israel, and discusses the complexities of the new situation in Israel. The paper demonstrates that a mutual feedback mechanism exists between Israeli society and Ethiopian Jews, according to which Israelis of various backgrounds claim that the guards have changed and the old guard - the religious leadership - has been replaced by a new guard - a young, secular leadership. This Israeli representation, which does not necessarily reflect the reality, is associated with Israeli categorisations of religion and secularisation, which treat religion as a dichotomy; in addition, it is fuelled by Ethiopian Jewish "secular" leaders, who are themselves members of the "new guard".

### CHANGING OF THE GUARDS: LEADERSHIP AMONG ETHIOPIAN JEWS IN ISRAEL<sup>1</sup>

This paper reports on one aspect of the complex subject of the communal integration of Jews from Ethiopia in Israel, by concentrating upon the subject of leadership. While it provides information on Ethiopian Jews' modes of organization and their perceptions of leadership, the discussion also includes insight into Israelis' representations of Ethiopian Jewish leadership. This paper is therefore an attempt to understand how specific modes of organization are incorporated into people's representations of issues or events. A representation is essentially a relation between two persons, or groups of persons, by which one holds the authority to express actions that incorporate in some way the agreement of the others. Following Durkheim's original formulation, representations are defined as

symbolic systems which include the whole world of cultural objects (Durkheim, 1954). In the case of representations of Ethiopian Jewish leadership, the article will show that Israelis and Ethiopian Jews portray leadership patterns in different manner, but that a certain collusion exists between the two groups.

The paper will first provide an historical survey of the Ethiopian Jews in Ethiopia, and describe the representations of leadership in Ethiopian society among this particular group by Israelis in Israeli society. Then, it will show on the basis of research<sup>2</sup> how Ethiopian Jews were actually organized in Ethiopia, and currently in Israel. Finally, it will discuss the premise of "changing of the guards", namely, that Ethiopian Jewish religious leadership from Ethiopia has been replaced by Ethiopian Jewish secular leadership in Israel.

### THE ETHIOPIAN JEWS - BACKGROUND

The Ethiopian Jews were known as *Falashas* in Ethiopia, although in the last decade they have rejected the appellation *Falasha*, which implied low, outsider status; in Israel they tend to be called Ethiopian Jews, whilst in Ethiopia they sometimes referred to themselves - and are referred to in the academic literature - as *Beta Israel* - "House of Israel" (Weil, 1995). These Beta Israel hail from villages in Gondar province, Woggera, the Simien Mountains, Walkait and the Shire region of Tigray. They are thus divided into two distinct linguistic entities speaking Amharic and Tigrinya respectively.

The origins of the Jews in Ethiopia are obscure. A popular chapter in Ethiopian history is that the Beta Israel were descended from the henchmen who accompanied Menelik, son of the union between King Solomon and Queen of Sheba. Almost all researchers, including those

who maintain that the Ethiopian Jews, as we know them today, did not exist in Ethiopia until at least the Middle Ages, admit that Jews have lived in Ethiopia from early times. However, some theories refer to them variously as descendants of Yemenite Jews, Agaus (Ullendorf, 1968), Jews who went down to Egypt and wandered south (Hancock, 1992)<sup>3</sup> or even an outgrowth of Jews who inhabited the garrison at the Elephantine Island (Kessler, 1982). Academic research into the liturgical music of the Beta Israel suggests that they formed as a group under the influence of Ethiopian Christian monasticism from the fourteenth century on (Shelemay, 1986).

From the fourteenth century on, there is documentation of *ayhud* ("Jews") who resisted the missionizing activity of Christian kings, and whilst these are probably Jews, the term can refer to a multiplicity of people, including all those who objected to orthodox Christian belief (Quirin, 1992). However, by the seventeenth century, the Beta Israel became a powerless minority with little or no rights on land. They eventually took up stigmatized craft occupations such as blacksmiths, weavers and potters, which also became associated with the connotation *falasha* (*ibid.*).

The Beta Israel practised a Torah-based, non-Talmudic type of Judaism. They were monotheistic, celebrated many festivals and fasts prescribed in the Torah, and circumcised their boys on the eighth day. Certain Jewish religious festivals were not marked by the Beta Israel, and the Beta Israel also celebrated certain days which were not marked by other Jews (*cf.* Weil, 1989). Their religious practices were heavily influenced by Ethiopic Christians and many elements were shared by both religions, such as praying to Jerusalem, a common liturgical literature in Geez, and so on (Pankhurst, 1995).

The process of the alignment of the Beta Israel with world Jewry had its seeds in the nineteenth century and arguably before, but contact with world Jewry only really began in the twentieth century with the advent of Dr. Jacques Faitlovitch, a Semitic scholar from the Sorbonne, who invested his life in bringing the Beta Israel in line with other Jews. From 1905-1934, he selected 25 Beta Israel young men in Ethiopia and

took them to Palestine and Europe, where he "planted" them in Jewish communities - in London, Paris, Florence, Frankfurt and so on. The idea was that they would become educated men and return to their villages in Ethiopia and teach their brethren. This dream was not fully realized, but nevertheless, Dr. Faitlovitch managed to influence sections of the community to come in line with world Jewry - a process that was actually completed in the 1980's and 1990's with the transplantation of a whole community to the State of Israel.

In 1973 the Sefardi Chief Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef declared that the *Falashas* (*sic*) were Jews; his opinion was reiterated by the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi in 1975. On the basis of these *halachic* (Jewish legal) decisions, the Ethiopian Jews began to emigrate to Israel from the 1980's on. In Operation Moses (1984-5), 7,700 Jews were airlifted out of the refugee camps of the Sudan to Israel; in 1991, 14,400 Jews were airlifted from Addis Abeba to Israel in 36 hours in Operation Solomon. Today, there are over 60,000 Jews of Ethiopian origin living in Israel.

#### REPRESENTATIONS OF ETHIOPIAN JEWISH LEADERSHIP IN ETHIOPIA BY ISRAELIS

The State of Israel was established in 1948, on the ideological principle that this was a Jewish homeland and that all Jews, of whatever origin, could "return" to the land of Israel. As a result, Israel is a heterogeneous country consisting of Jews from many different ethnic origins, as well as Arab Muslims and Christians, Druze and other minorities. In addition to ethnic diversity, Israelis differ as to religious adherence and affiliation, ranging from ultra-orthodox Jews (and fundamentalist Arabs) to secularists. Another distinguishing factor in the population is economic class, with a large economic distribution between rich and poor, class often overlapping with ethnic origin. "Israelis", then, clearly consist of a wide range of different people. Nevertheless, one can still talk of Israeli representations of Ethiopian Jews, and specifically of Ethiopian Jewish leadership, as they are expressed in the media and in superficial contacts with the ethnic community. Often, these repre-



sentations are encouraged by Ethiopian Jews' public statements of their perceptions of what life was like in Ethiopia - or an idealization of that life - as we shall see below.

Israelis tend to represent Ethiopian Jewish leadership in Ethiopia as a solely religious leadership. The word *kes* (priest) utilized in its Hebraized plural form as *kessim* (not *kessoch*, as in Amharic) has infiltrated the Israeli press and has become part and parcel of the Hebrew, and indeed, the English language. In an article which appeared in the Israeli English-language daily in February 1991, the son of a *kes* described his father's functioning as almost all-embracing: "The *kes* was the spiritual father<sup>4</sup> of the Ethiopian village. In Ethiopia he was the individual responsible for souls. People turned to him for questions from how to keep Pessach (the feast of Passover) or how to keep the family peace. The *kes* solved peoples' problems" (Jerusalem Post, 2 February 1991).

Here is an example of a description of the functions of the *kes* provided by a member of the ethnic community, which has been accepted generally by the Israeli public. Basing themselves on the belief that only religious leadership existed in Ethiopia, the conclusion drawn by certain groups in Israel is to institute courses to preserve the status of the *kessoch* and restore the leadership roles they apparently had in Ethiopia. The problem, however, is that the same groups which aim at re-instituting the *kessoch*, also want them to adapt to Israeli Judaism and effectively change their roles. Hence, a course at a *yeshiva* (institute of higher religious learning) in Jerusalem to re-train *kessoch* as Rabbis, also had to teach them orthodox Judaism, as it is practised today in Israel by orthodox Jews. Since the Ethiopian Jews were cut off from other Jewish communities in the past and knew no Oral Law (see above), their practice of Judaism was different in Ethiopia.

The idea that the *kes* decided all matters in Ethiopia and that in Israel his powers are dwindling emerges as an Israeli representation of Ethiopian Jewish leadership. Taking this dictum as self-evident, some religious bodies believe that they should strengthen the religious leadership and reinvest it with its past glory. In practice, however, most people believe this is im-

possible, particularly since there is such a large gap between Ethiopian and Israeli Judaism. There are therefore attempts by other bodies to cultivate a young, so-called "secular" leadership with whom they can communicate in Hebrew and who appear, at least externally, more similar to them.

The major representation of Ethiopian Jewish leadership in Israel then, is that the religious leadership which stood at the helm of Ethiopian Jewry in Ethiopia is being replaced by a secular leadership in Israel. The proposition that migration has been accompanied by a "changing of the guards," and that secular leaders in Israel are substituting the religious leadership of Ethiopia is fostered by members of this very Ethiopian Jewish "secular" leadership in Israel. Countless newspaper articles collected during fieldwork attest to the popularity of the idea. As "one of the community's leading activists and head of the Amharic division of Israel Radio" said: "The leadership has passed to the young generation, to people fluent in the language, in the way of life here, in the political workings of the State. The *kessim* are somewhere in the distance" (Jerusalem Post, 2 February 1991).

#### RELIGIOUS VS. SECULAR ETHIOPIAN JEWISH LEADERSHIP IN ETHIOPIA

Fieldwork among Ethiopian Jews in Israel on the subject of communal organization and leadership revealed a much more sophisticated picture than that portrayed in the Israeli media. Ethiopian immigrants testified that there was a complex process of village organization in Ethiopia in which elders, women and youth were involved. The *liqa manbar* acted as the village chairman or representative of the local government; the *ferdi shango* investigated and judged decisions at a local-level.<sup>5</sup> The *shmagelle* (elders) worked in personal, familial and communal fields. Side-by-side, *kessoch*, who replaced the *malokse* (monks) as Jewish religious leaders, had religious and, in our terms, social work functions. Even before the 1974 Marxist revolution, in which Mengistu Haile Mariam took power, communal organization among the Jews in Ethiopia was complex and pervasive.

Leadership was not solely in the hands of a

religious leadership. As early as the 17th century, there is documentation of *azmach* (generals) and *azzaj* (commanders), who were military appointees and local officials, while *bajerond* (treasurers) were leaders with artisan skills. According to Quirin, "During the height of construction and growth in Gondar, the secular leaders in Gondar were well-respected and have been remembered in their oral traditions to a greater extent than the religious elite - even in traditions passed down through the monastic tradition!" (Quirin, 1922:106). Continuing into the twentieth century, Ethiopian Jews who had received no religious training, held leadership positions in what Kaplan describes as a "decentralized pattern of communal organisation" (Kaplan, 1988b:160).

It should be stressed that "secular" leaders were not necessarily *shmagelle* (elders). Moreover, *shmagelle* were often religious, although they dealt with jurisdiction on non-religious matters. In addition, they solved other matters, which, in our terms, might be the province of a religious leader, such as marriage counselling or disputes between community members.

The emergence of another type of non-religious/non-*shmagelle* leader began before the twentieth century, but the catalyst in the twentieth century was Dr. Jacques Faitlovitch, a Jew studying at the Sorbonne in Paris, who first visited Ethiopia in 1904. While Dr. Faitlovitch records that he met with *kessoch* on his visits to Ethiopia (Faitlovitch, 1910), he never actually consulted with them. He tried to develop an alternative leadership, which would eventually teach the "Falashas" another type of Judaism (namely, the one closest to the religion he practised), as well as train them in secular skills. As he explained to the America Pro-Falasha Committee<sup>6</sup>: "The kind of leadership they require is to train... Falasha youths in Europe, in Palestine and in Abyssinia for leadership in religious work, in public health instruction and in agriculture methods" (Faitlovitch, 1922). Hence, the 25 students he selected in Ethiopia to study in Jewish communities in Europe between 1905 and the 1930's with a view to sending them back as "leaders" to their villages. These leaders could in no way be considered to be either religious leaders or *shmagelle*. They were appointed from

outside with external legitimization, as opposed to indigenous leaders who still operated at the village level.

#### NEW LEADERSHIP PATTERNS IN ISRAEL

In January 1996, Ethiopian Jews in Israel staged a massive (by Israeli standards) demonstration against the Magen David Adom's (Israel's equivalent of the Red Cross) policy of discarding Ethiopian blood, who are a high-risk AIDS group.<sup>7</sup> Nearly 16,000 demonstrators held placards written in both Hebrew and English for the benefit of the international media<sup>8</sup> with slogans such as "No, to racism!" "Our blood is good". The Ethiopian Jews felt perceived inequality in the guise of racism and discrimination.

At the demonstration, the police opened fire with tear gas. Leaders were shouting in Amharic and Hebrew from megaphones. The demonstrators broke ranks and left the hill allocated to them opposite the Prime Minister's Office surging onto the car park of the Office. Security forces were on the alert since this was only a couple of months after the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin. When the police became out of control, Border Police were brought in as reinforcements. The then Minister of Absorption, Yair Tsaban, was hauled up by police on the top of the roof of one of the buildings of the Prime Minister's Office to address the crowds. Known as a Minister who had bestowed unprecedented privileges and benefits on the Ethiopian Jews, the Minister was booed down. United Ethiopian Organisation chairman, and now Member of Knesset (Israel's Parliament), Adisu Messele, scored better. Screaming slogans through a megaphone, he addressed the crowd and had them repeat after him with raised fists that they object to racism, that the Ethiopians are quiet people, and that they demand that the Prime Minister come out and speak to them. In the end, a delegation of Ethiopian Jews including five *kessoch* (Geez: religious leaders/priests) and several "young" leaders entered the Prime Minister's Office for consultations. When the delegation did not emerge quickly, the crowd started provoking the police. In the afternoon, the police opened fire again with tear gas. One



policeman lost his eye in the demonstration, several demonstrators were wounded and taken to hospital, and cars parked in the Prime Minister's Office car park were vandalized. The crowd dispersed at the end of the day with the promise that the director of the Magen David Adom would be fired, and that other measures would be taken to pacify the ethnic community.

In the aftermath of the demonstration, President Weizmann apologised to the Ethiopian community as did then Prime Minister Peres, a Commission of Enquiry chaired by past-President of Israel, Yitzhak Navon was appointed to hear the reasons for the AIDS policy and provide future directives; and Adisu Messele, was voted in as the first Ethiopian Jewish Member of Knesset in the May 1996 national elections. There is no question that the demonstration helped place Messele in power and that a new era of leadership had begun for the Ethiopian Jewish community.

To date, several young people have taken up positions as Ethiopian advisors to Ministers at the national level. At the municipal level, almost every city with a concentration of Ethiopian Jews, employed one or several Ethiopian Jews in administrative or community worker positions. Meanwhile, the number of communal organizations registered with the Ministry of Interior which, in 1991, ran to over 50, was reported to have risen to over 100. Each organization was headed by its own leader or group of leaders.

In 1995, 12 young males and one *kes*, who had studied at the *yeshiva* (institute of religious higher learning) mentioned above, were appointed Rabbis by the Israeli Chief Rabbinate, with rights to work in local religious councils in different cities throughout the country. In practice, some of the Rabbis' rights are limited and those who work tend to act as religious functionaries for their own communities. Nevertheless, no new *kessoch* have been ordained, although two brothers were appointed as *kessoch* by their father, a *kes*, in a ceremony which was acknowledged only by the father's following.<sup>9</sup>

#### CONCLUDING DISCUSSION: HAVE THE GUARDS REALLY CHANGED?

The contention that religious leadership is de-

clining among Ethiopian Jews in Israel and that it is being replaced by a young secular leadership - "the changing of the guards" - is reiterated continuously in the media and reinforced by several prominent Ethiopian leaders, including the Ethiopian Jewish Member of Parliament who supports state secular education for Ethiopian Jews in Israel, and other such causes. At first sight, this representation of Ethiopian Jewish leadership in Israel appears to be accurate, particularly in the light of recent events, and especially the demonstration about AIDS, which was led by "secular" leaders belonging to different Ethiopian Jewish organizations.

However, the reality is not as simple as it first appears. I would suggest that people who received religious training in Ethiopia work in one sphere providing religious guidance for their people, and they continue to act in this capacity in Israel. The younger, secular leaders have no pretensions of being priests for the community, and no qualifications to be religious leaders. On the contrary, the non-religious leaders of the community are often dependent upon the *kessoch* to receive religious legitimization for political acts, a practice which is well-received and understood in Israeli society where their leaders give religious blessing to secular politics.<sup>10</sup> It should be noted how *kessoch* were called in for consultations with senior Israeli politicians in order to solve the problems of the AIDS demonstration. Even if this was a symbolic act, it was of enormous political and cultural significance, and similar scenarios have occurred at nearly all Ethiopian Jewish demonstrations in Israel.

Thus, while the younger Ethiopian Jewish leaders are active in other, non-religious spheres, which can usually be defined as political, they are dependent upon the old-time religious leaders for legitimation. In addition, it should be remarked that the so-called "secular" leaders are often involved to an extraordinary degree with matters which others would define as "religious," such as the establishment of a synagogue, or the preservation of Ethiopian Jewish religious heritage. It should also be pointed out that up to the demonstration about AIDS, the major issues around which the community rallied were in fact religious issues. The most important of these

since Operation Moses (1984-5) was the strike opposite the Chief Rabbinate in Jerusalem over conversion (Kaplan, 1988a). In August and September 1991, the community demonstrated over the religious status and recognition of the *kessoch* in Israel; since then a major issue is the (still unsolved) *Faras Mura*<sup>11</sup> controversy, which can also be interpreted as a religious or religio-legal issue, in that the *Faras Mura*, who converted to Christianity from Judaism from the nineteenth century on, are pressing to immigrate to Israel under Israel's Law of Return (Weil, 1997).

Finally, the religious/secular dichotomy in the "changing of the guards" representation reflects a very Western and a specifically Israeli way of viewing the world. To date, the vast majority of young Ethiopian immigrant leaders would be hard pressed to define themselves as "secular"—some of them even sport a skull cap, which is the Israeli symbol of being religious. Perhaps this is a sign of their not being completely "Israeli", or the adoption of Oriental Jewish Israeli traits.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the Western dichotomy has in general not been adopted by Ethiopian immigrants in Israel today.

The paper shows that a mutual feedback mechanism exists between Israeli society and Ethiopian Jews, according to which Israelis of various backgrounds display different levels of knowledge about Ethiopian Jewish leadership and communal organization. However, there appears to be a consensus, a representation in the Durkheimian sense of the word (1954), by which Israelis hold the authority to express actions that incorporate in some way the agreement of the Ethiopian Jews. According to this representation, the guards have changed, and the old guard - the religious leadership - has been replaced by a new guard - a young, secular leadership. This representation, which does not necessarily reflect the reality or portray the complexities of the changes which Ethiopian Jews in Israel are undergoing, is associated with Israeli categorizations of religion and secularization, which treat religion as a compartmentalized box separate from commonsense or scientific knowledge; in addition, it is fuelled by Ethiopian Jewish "secular" leaders, who are themselves members of the "new guard".

## NOTES

1. This paper, in preliminary form, benefited from comments by colleagues who attended a meeting of the Jerusalem Anthropology Circle, May 1997.
2. Research into communal organisation among Ethiopian Jews in Israel was commissioned by the New York UJA-Federation (Israel Office), 1991-2.
3. This indigenous idea was reported to Graham Hancock (1992) by Kes Hadane, an Ethiopian Jewish religious leader.
4. The role of the *kes* was strictly masculine.
5. I thank Professor Olga Kapeliuk for providing me with the correct transliteration of these titles, and Dr. Chaim Rosen for bringing my attention to the difference in pronunciation of these words (*Likomember* and *ferdeshengo* (sic) respectively) and their written form.
6. The officers of this committee were Dr. Cyrus Adler of Philadelphia, Dr. Elias Margolis of Mt. Vernon, New York and Rabbi Max Weiss and Dr. Elias Solomon of New York City.
7. This section is based upon participant observation at the demonstration.
8. The demonstration was covered in all the international media. Dr. D. K. Behera, Editor of Journal of Social Sciences, saw me at the demonstration on the BBC in India.
9. My research assistant, Rina Hirshfeld, attended the inauguration ceremony of the two *kessoch*, and I have in my possession a professional video of the event.
10. An example of this type of behaviour is the "Council of Torah Sages" which dictates to the ultra-orthodox party, Agudat Israel, how to vote.
11. For a brief discussion of the origin of this designation, see Weil, 1995 : 27.
12. Shokeid talks of "masoret (Lit : tradition) religiosity" specifically among Middle Eastern Jews, which he believes "... may be more than an ethnic peculiarity" (1995 : 237)

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