

## The Falashas--A Background Paper

The Falashas, or Ethiopian Jews, have lived in Ethiopia for millenia, Judaism being widespread there before the conversion of the Ethiopian Axum dynasty to Christianity in the fourth century. Estimates of the current Falasha population are in the 25-30,000 range; and some 320 more live in Israel.

Most of the Falashas--also known as Beta Israel--are to be found in the mountainous highlands of Gondar region, north of Lake Tana in Begemdir province, and in the Wollo and Tigre provinces. These areas have been hard hit both by internecine conflict in Ethiopia since the September, 1974 revolution there and as a result of the Ethiopian-Eritrean struggle.

Given existing condition, accurate figures are hard to come by, but a minimum of two-score Falashas are known to have been murdered. (Some counts go much higher.) Others have been sold into slavery; still others saw their possessions looted; and an indeterminate number have become refugees either in Ethiopia itself or in neighboring Sudan.

Reforms instituted by the central government of Lt. Colonel Mengistu Haile Miriam brought land to some Falashas. It also brought the enmity and attacks of the former Ethiopian nobility and landowners who organized the Ethiopian Democratic Union, which frequently has mounted raids into the Gondar region. The Falashas have been grateful to, and supportive of, the Mengistu regime. This has brought down on them the attacks of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party, which claims to be more Marxist and anti-Zionist than the regime.

This last suffering of the Falashas worsened their already miserable plight, even by Ethiopian standards. Once a powerful and virtually independent kingdom with a population of some quarter of a million, the Falashas were conquered in the 17th century by the Negus Susenyos. Great numbers were massacred, others enslaved, their lands confiscated, conversion forced upon them and, even, Jewish observance forbidden for a time. Thereafter they lived in poverty and degradation, virtually as indentured labor.

The Falashas first contact with the modern world came in the early 19th century, through Protestant missionaries who initiated a conversion process that further diminished this community. Withal, the Falashas have strongly maintained their Jewishness and always have considered themselves part of the Jewish people. Strong belief in eventual return to the Holy land was evidenced in various unsuccessful Messianic movements such as an unsuccessful 1862 attempt to reach Jerusalem by foot, in which many died. Outside controversy about their Judaism was resolved early in 1973, when Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef of Israel ruled they were Jews, as descendants of the son of Dan.

The Haile Selassie regime always opposed any emigration. Only about 170 Jews managed to reach Israel in various ways prior to the September, 1974 revolution. The Mengistu regime, too, does not permit emigration. It briefly closed the departure of 122 Jews in 1977, but then hardened its position. Just a handful have made their way to Israel since, plus some thirty-two Falasha refugees from the Sudan. The overwhelming majority, it is known, would depart if they could.

Various Jewish individuals and organizations have worked in Ethiopia to give Falashas some education and other assistance since the turn of this century. Such efforts were greatly expanded in 1976, when the Ethiopian authorities gave permission to ORT to undertake a general regional program of technical and education assistance, in the Gondar region, where the Falashas are concentrated. Support for this has come from several nations, with the U.S. Aid Program giving three quarter million dollars over two years. U.S. aid assistance now has stopped, but the program continues.

The major objective, though, is to try and achieve Falasha emigration. Key questions are: Can the Mengistu regime be persuaded to permit such movement? What are the contacts, governmental or other, that can be helpful in reaching the Mengistu regime? And what are those factors that might positively influence its judgment?

January 1980

NJ  
For NJCRAC

## The Falashas--A Background Paper

American Jewish Committee  
Foreign Affairs Department

### Introduction

The fate of the Falashas, the Jews of Ethiopia, has been the subject of growing concern, and not a little controversy, in the American Jewish community. Most recent estimates put the number of Falashas--also known as Beta Israel--in the 25-30,000 range; and there are about 320 more in Israel.

Long subject to dire poverty and degradation, their number steadily eroded by conversionary missionary efforts since the early 19th century, the Falashas have particularly suffered in recent years, as Ethiopia has been wracked by revolution and engaged in two murderous wars, since September 1974.

Estimates of the total of Falashas killed range from two-score to over two hundred; others were sold into slavery; still others saw their possessions looted, and an indeterminate number became refugees. The situation has improved somewhat as the central government headed by Lt. Colonel Mengistu Haile Miriam had gradually spread and re-enforced its control in the past year.

The primary objective, in seeking to help Falashas, is to try and achieve their emigration to Israel. The Mengistu regime--considered favorable to the Falashas in other respects and considered favorably by them--does not permit emigration. There is also an important, and growing, educational and technical program being carried on in Ethiopia on behalf of Falashas. Controversy has been sharp on whether efforts to help Falashas have been as adequate or appropriate as possible. Despite this, adherents of widely different views--brought together in an NJCRAC committee headed by Dan Shapiro--have been able to agree on several basic points of a program now on behalf of Falashas.

The Israel government and the Jewish Agency, long opposed to overt action on the Falasha issue, shifted position last November and presently welcome more active Jewish communal support for pro-Falasha efforts. Also, an inter-ministerial committee was established by the Israel government to coordinate pro-Falasha efforts.

### The Historical Background Until the 1974 Revolution

The presence of Falashas in Ethiopia goes back millenia, whether one accepts Falasha tradition that they originated with notables who came back with Menelik, son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, or the theory that they were a local population converted by Jews arriving from southern Arabia. Judaism was widespread before the conversion of the Ethiopian Axum dynasty to Christianity in the fourth century. The Falashas became a powerful and independent kingdom allegedly numbering as much as a quarter of a million, oft engaged in wars with Moslems or the various Ethiopian neguses, and reputed for their bravery. In the 17th century, though, they were conquered by the negus Susenyos, with many massacred and others sold into slavery, conversion forced upon them and Jewish observance forbidden for a time. Their lands were confiscated; and thereafter they lived in poverty and degradation, virtually as indentured labor.



The first more or less continuous contact of the Falashas with the modern world came in the early 19th century through Protestant missionaries, who initiated a conversion process that has continued strongly until the present. Jewish interest was minimal. It was not until 1904 that the Falashas found a champion in Frenchman Jacques Faitlowitz, who worked on their behalf until his death in 1955. He set up pro-Falasha committees, helped establish a boarding school in Addis Ababa in the 1920s, and brought a handful to Europe and Israel for modern education, including Yona Bogale, an acknowledged leader and spokesman of Ethiopian Jews who came to plead the Falasha case at the Montreal meeting of the Council of Federations and Welfare Funds this past November.

The Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1936 and then World War II interrupted pro-Falasha efforts. Renewed after the war, primarily by the British Falasha Welfare Association, these met with little real resonance and were quite limited in scope. In 1954 Faitlowitz persuaded the Jewish Agency to bring some Falasha youth to Israel for study, at Kfar Batya. Some of these later returned to Ethiopia to work there, as did others trained in a seminary established in Asmara, Eritrea; and a small network of village schools and a couple of health centers were provided thanks to outside aid, by the early 1970s. The Haile Selassie government made some land available to the Falashas to establish a colony near the Sudan border in 1970, but miserable climactic conditions and raids by neighboring tribes claiming the land as theirs brought this experiment to nought.

Despite some valiant individual efforts, therefore, connection with the Falashas has been desultory. Faitlowitz had estimated the Falasha numbers at about 50,000 at the turn of the century. Conversion and losses as young Jews quit the traditional highland Falasha villages for larger towns and cities were substantially to reduce this number even before the dramatic events in Ethiopia of recent years, sorely affecting the northern Ethiopian provinces of Begemdir (Gondar region), Tigre and Wolle where the majority of Falashas are to be found.

A census by Jewish organizations working in Ethiopia done in 1976 put their number at 28,189 comprising 6,092 families in 490 widely distributed settlements, with about half being children. The largest concentration is in the Gondar region, north of lake Tana, in the town of Ambober. Falashas traditionally live alongside, but not together with, their non-Jewish neighbors in the highland villages, engaged in farming or crafts, the latter an activity spurned by other Ethiopians. An October 1979 census found 24,557 in the Gondar region, 1,718 in Wollo and 1,554 in Tigre.

#### Emigration Prior to the Revolution

Falashas always considered themselves as part of the Jewish people and have had strong belief in eventual return to the Holy Land, as evidenced by various unsuccessful Messianic movements such as an 1862 attempt to reach Jerusalem by foot in which many died. But for many, however, Falashas were not Jews. It was not until early 1973 that Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef of Israel ruled they were Jews, as descendents of the tribe of Dan; and even then, for a while, the 170 or so Falashas in Israel could receive no benefits until they underwent symbolic conversion. Some were those brought originally by Faitlowitz. Others had made their way out to Red Sea ports and then gotten up to Elath. Still others posed as Christian pilgrims to get Israeli visas in Ethiopia and then come to Israel. There had been a plan sponsored by British jurist Norman Bentwich to bring out 50 families in 1961, with Ethiopian government approval, but this had fallen through. The miniscule trickle that reached Israel during the next decade did so on its own and, once there, adjusted quite well.

### After the 1974 Revolution

The deposition of Haile Selassie and abolition of the monarchy, at first bloodless, developed into internecine Ethiopian warfare following radical urban and rural land reforms in 1975. An internal struggle brought Lieutenant Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam to power in February, 1977, after a palace gun battle among the members of the nation's military council, known as the Dergue. The months thereafter were to see sheer terror and murder in the streets as Ethiopian students were massacred, peasants' militias went on the rampage and various Marxist groups and Mengistu supporters, also strongly Marxist, killed each other off. Within a year, further, came a widespread famine in the northern provinces.

Ethiopia, at the same time, was--and still is--fighting two wars. One in the southwest Ogaden region with guerrillas supported by Somalia, the other in the northwest against Eritreans seeking to break away from the sway imposed upon them by Selassie from 1950 onward. Wars, famine and internal strife brought in their wake hundreds of thousands of refugees, many fleeing to neighboring Sudan.

There was also a wrenching of alliances as the new government cancelled the 25 year-old Ethiopian-U.S. defense pact and the Soviet Union, formerly a Somali ally, poured arms and aid into the country to be used against Somalia; and the new regime got different kinds of assistance from Western states and South Korea even as Soviets, East Germans and Cuba brought in aid and, too, personnel. The Israelis also were furnishing some military advisers and spare parts for American made weapons, it was reported in August, 1977.

The upheavals severely affected the Falashas. The government's reforms brought them land--and the enmity and attacks of former nobility and landlords who organized the Ethiopian Democratic Union, which mounted raids into Gondar from the Sudan. The Falashas were grateful to, and supportive of, the central government, bringing down upon them attacks of the even more left-wing and anti-Zionist Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party. The Eritrean war is being fought on the doorstep of the Tigre, Wollo and Begemdir provinces in which most Falashas live. For years, the central government's writ did not run too far from various key fortified cities in these provinces. But more recently it has driven the Eritreans out of the major cities in that area and has stabilized the Ogaden conflict; and has established wider and firmer--if not always continuous--control. After some relative calm a part of the Gondar area was marked by general insecurity and arrests in the first part of 1979, with conditions again improving thereafter.

### Emigration

It was against this chaotic background that the first organized efforts to bring Falashas out of Ethiopia occurred. In September, 1974, the Israel government instructed its embassies in other countries to issue visas to Falashas without restriction, should any arrive. The new regime, like Haile Selassie, also has made emigration illegal. In 1975, seven Falashas were brought to Israel by Koor Industries for work purposes as the advance group of another 73. Publication about this move was denounced by the Absorption Ministry in Israel as "stupid and dangerous." At the same time, though, Israeli authorities were announcing that, henceforth, Falashas were entitled to full citizenship. The other 73 never left Ethiopia.



Not until some months after the Begin government came to office in 1977 was there further movement. Two groups totalling 121 were brought to Israel--half in August, half at the end of the year--doubtless with the tacit knowledge of the Mengistu regime. In February, 1978, however, Foreign Minister Dayan, in response to press questioning, confirmed that Israel had indeed been furnishing arms to Ethiopia. Since no avowedly Marxist and publicly anti-Zionist regime could allow itself to be cast openly into this position there was undoubted damage and, in any event, no further exit.

In the meantime, however, Falashas in Israel were receiving word from Ethiopia of friends and relatives being killed and sold into slavery, or suffering from adversity. Their calls to action, and those of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, culminated in a demonstration before the Knesset as 1978 ended. Some days later a Falasha delegation was received by Premier Menahem Begin, who stressed the importance he laid to Falasha movement.

Withal, 1979 saw only 5 Falashas make their way to Israel from Ethiopia. Increased attention was turned to Falasha refugees elsewhere and thirty-two were helped to reach Israel in 1979.

### Aid Inside Ethiopia

Despite the revolutionary chaos, and partially as a result of it, there was a small quantum jump in the aid given to Falashas through the Falasha Welfare Association. This engaged a full-time professional inside Ethiopia just about when the revolution broke. He was forced to flee in April, 1975, but was replaced. A new-style approach on a different scale was launched in 1976 by ORT, with the cooperation of the Joint Distribution Committee. ORT--as is largely unknown--successfully has worked with a number of Third World countries at their request. This background made it persona grata to the new regime when it proposed a rural development program for the Gondar regime as a whole that permitted it to aid Falashas. It has found support for this program from a number of nations including Holland, Canada, West Germany and Sweden; and the U.S. Aid Program has given three-quarter million dollars over two years.

The ORT program today comprises 22 schools, 13 of them new, with a staff of 73 teachers, public hygiene work and health care including the building of one new clinic and remodeling of another, digging of wells, agricultural technical assistance, loans and poultry farming, and even the construction of a road. Hebrew is among the subjects taught.

### Policies and Options

When queried about the Falasha issue in the past, Israeli and Jewish Agency officials always had insisted that publicity or outside intervention would be counter-productive and even dangerous. Beginning in 1975, this approach became less and less acceptable to critics in the United States and to Falashas in Israel. In the fall of 1979, Falashas in Israel and American supporters again took to public demonstration. In a volte-face, the Jewish Agency called for a public campaign on behalf of the Falashas. The government, more moderate, asked for assistance in seeking to influence the Ethiopian government.

The Ethiopian regime, it must be remembered, is a touchy one indeed, and outside intervention is not always appreciated. Ethiopia has rejected human rights protests by Amnesty and various church groups.

It denounced January, 1979 accounts appearing in the Israeli press about the Falashas plight, asserting in an Addis Ababa communique that it was the Haile Selassie government that had oppressed Falashas, while it had helped them. The Ethiopian embassy in Mexico attacked a broadcast about the Falashas by AJC's Marc Tanenbaum, reprinted in Spanish, in much the same vein. The fact of the matter is, too, that--emigration apart--the attitude of the Mengistu regime and local Ethiopian authorities to Falashas has been a positive one.

The key question is, then: Can the Mengistu regime be persuaded to permit Jewish movement and is there anything that might be helpful in getting it to agree? A corollary question is: May the very intervention on this score cause any difficulties for the Falashas in Ethiopia or on-going aid program in Ethiopia?

Ethiopian sensitivity apart, one must recognize that there is little leverage one can bring to bear. Ethiopian Marxist-style denunciation of the U.S. is routine; it voted with the Soviets on Afghanistan. U.S.-Ethiopian relations, as noted, are already low indeed. Nor can the Ethiopians be very happy with the idea that the U.S. shortly may be establishing a major military base in Berera, in Somalia, its enemy.

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What kind of approach may be feasible? There is agreement

-- That there should be no attack of any kind on the Mengistu regime, since this only could be dangerous.

-- That any approach put forward be on the humanitarian grounds of family reunion: there may only be 300 Falashas in Israel, but the Falasha (and Ethiopian) concept of family is a very wide one. That another approach be to test whether there could be granting of visas by the Ethiopians for purposes of study by Falashas outside the country.

-- That the effort should be made to interest U.S. Congressmen and administration officials in the plight of the Falashas. There is some belief that the Ethiopian regime may be interested in grain, and the Congressmen would be sounded out whether they would be ready to support giving this.

-- That one should do all one could to seek out Falasha refugees in neighboring lands, so as to help bring them to Israel.

-- That a Jewish delegation go to Ethiopia, to bring back a picture of how Falashas live.

-- That there be an educational campaign concerning Falashas among the Jewish community to make it better aware of the Falasha plight and in support of these objectives.

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## The Falashas: Background and Options

### The Issues

Few subjects have given rise to as much controversy in the American Jewish community in the past few years as has that of the Falashas, the Jews of Ethiopia, also known as Beta Israel. Most recent estimates put their population in the 25-30,000 range; and approximately three hundred are now in Israel.

That Falashas presently are so much a subject for concern and debate among American Jews, and in Israel, is in large measure due to the efforts of a handful of persons such as Graenum Berger and Professor Howard Lenhoff, heads of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, working with some Falashas in Israel and joined by student groups such as Network that have made the Falasha plight their special cause.

Giving particular resonance to this cause is their claim and the fear--one to which American Jews are particularly attuned since the Holocaust--that this ancient Jewish community is doomed to perish rapidly unless immediate action is taken on its behalf, and the Falashas enabled to emigrate to Israel.

For the Falashas have suffered severely in recent years with estimates of those killed ranging from 36 to 232, others sold into slavery, still others seeing their possessions looted and an untold number becoming refugees as various armed factions fought the central government headed by Lt. Colonel Mengistu Haile Miriam that came to power in the convulsions after the 1974 revolution against Emperor Haile Selassie. This situation has improved since the end of 1978, with the spread and reenforcement of central government control over wider areas.

In a welter of charges and counter-charges controversy has raged on such critical points as:

-- Did the Israel government and the Jewish Agency do all they could in the past to bring Falashas out of Ethiopia or--partly motivated by various political considerations, partly, even by racism--were they really opposed to this?

-- Is the on-going program of aid to Falashas in Ethiopia--co-sponsored by the ORT and the Joint Distribution Committee as part of a wider program reaching non-Jews as well--one that truly helps Falashas or, rather, one that threatens Falasha identity by throwing them into the kind of relationship with non-Jews they wish to avoid?

-- Is the nature of the campaign being waged on behalf of the Falashas by their most ardent supporters, together with Falasha elements in Israel, one that may endanger both quiet attempts to achieve Falasha emigration and the situation of the Falashas in Ethiopia rather than help them?

Presently, the underlying difference in approach about what to do concerning Falashas turns on the following argument.

On the one hand it is claimed that there are a substantial number of Falashas who have taken refuge in the Sudan who could be



located and brought to Israel if the proper effort were made by the Israel government; and that, more fundamentally, Israel could arrange with the Ethiopian government for a substantial exodus of Falashas if only it so desired. Israel, in short, is characterized as the true blocking point.

On the other hand the case is made that the number of refugees in the Sudan constantly is exaggerated and that those few found are moved when located. As to substantial exodus, to think that Israel could have arranged this in the light of existing conditions in Ethiopia these past few years is, it is asserted, completely to mis-read and mis-portray the situation in that nation presently engaged in war on several fronts and seeking to consolidate its September, 1974 revolution. Ethiopia, and conditions there, thus, are presented as the real block to action.

Both the Jewish Agency and the Israel government have shifted stance since November, 1979. In place of their former hush-hush policies, both now advocate more active campaigns by Jewish communities and organizations on behalf of Falashas. How much these shifts may have been prompted by the need to meet the growing pressures and criticism felt in the United State, Israel and elsewhere and how much they may result from perceived changes in the attitude of the Ethiopian authorities is a moot but critical point requiring deeper investigation as one seeks to shape strategy.

While adherents of these differing views recently have reached some tenuous agreement on avenues to be probed on the Falashas' behalf, underlying differences remain powerful.

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When, in 1973, Rabbi Yosef made his ruling, the Israel Foreign Ministry refused to discuss it; and there were charges at the time that the Israeli embassy in Addis Ababa was reluctant to give visas to Falashas and actively discouraged requests. Israel and the Haile Selassie government, it should be pointed out, had close and extensive relations, and emigration from Ethiopia was illegal under the emperor. Like many other African nations, Ethiopia broke off diplomatic relations with Israel following the Six-Day war, but various commercial relations were maintained, continued even today, despite this break and the 1974 revolution in Ethiopia.

\* Tigre province estimates vary widely. When an ORT representative visited there recently at government invitation he was told by the authorities their estimate was some 4,000; and local Falashas spoke of as many as 20,000!



### After the 1974 Revolution

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Withal, 1979 saw only 5 Falashas make their way to Israel from Ethiopia. Attention was turned to the Sudan. Critics of Israel alleged that there were hundreds if not thousands of Falasha refugees in that country, and that Israel--which has no relations with the Sudan--nonetheless could find them if it would. Several trips were made into the Sudan by one of these critics who returned with lists of names that numbered not in the hundreds but in the dozens and which, with few exceptions, already were known to Jewish organizations which had carried out their own investigation. Thirty-two of these persons were helped to depart to Israel in 1979 and the promise made that all other legitimate Falashas (there are refugees who pretend to be) would likewise be assisted, when located. Searches that have been made have not been productive. To this, the critics now contend, but advance no evidence, that such searches have concentrated on the refugee camps, but that the Falashas are out of the camps.

Various schemes have been put forward for moving Falashas across frontiers. Some Falashas in Israel insist that if they could go to Ethiopia and would be helped they could bring several hundreds, at least, across the borders. Other proposals would involve contact with elements hostile not only to the central regime but, also, on the basis of past experience, to the Falashas themselves. Terrain conditions in Ethiopia and the dangers involved in any sizeable journey, moreover, work to make illegal exit impractical for any but the hardiest, for all that the Sudan border is a sieve. And certainly one must ask oneself what will be the reaction of the Mengistu regime, now favorable to the Falashas, if it catches wind of any organized exit movement to which it has not agreed.



## Aid Inside Ethiopia

Despite the revolutionary chaos, and partially as a result of it, there was a small quantum jump in the aid given to Falashas through the Falasha Welfare Association. This engaged a full-time professional inside Ethiopia just about when the revolution broke. He was forced to flee in April, 1975, but was replaced. A new-style approach on a different scale was launched in 1976 by ORT, with the cooperation of the Joint Distribution Committee. ORT--as is largely unknown--successfully has worked with a number of Third World countries at their request. This background made it persona grata to the new regime when it proposed a rural development program for the Gondar region, a program for which it has found support from a number of nations including Holland, Canada, West Germany and Sweden; and the U.S. Aid Program has given three-quarter million dollars over two years.

This last sum alone was a far cry from the \$150,000 or so budget available to the FWA from Jewish resources alone prior to the ORT initiative. The nature of the new project, however, made it essential to have the active approval and cooperation of the Ethiopian government authorities as against their tacit acceptance of the prior welfare operation. It meant, too, a program in which Falashas might be the central element but which by definition would have to be more general and would include Christian elements since planned for a region in which Falashas make up but one percent of the population.

The shift in character and scope of the program sorely upset certain of the old-time Falasha leadership. It also was to be challenged and attacked, privately and later more publicly, by some ORT employees. One of these wrote to a number of governments aiding the ORT project, charging that their funds were not being used for the purposes allocated. This led a number of them to investigate the program (not without difficulty since even foreign diplomats often are not allowed to move far from Addis Ababa). ORT always got not just a clean bill of health but high commendation. Such commendation, came, too, from (London) Jewish Chronicle publisher David Kessler, whose family long had been active in the work of the FWA and its predecessor group.

The ORT program today comprises 22 schools, 13 of them new, with a staff of 73 teachers, public hygiene work and health care including the building of one new clinic and remodeling of another, digging of wells, agricultural technical assistance, loans and poultry farming, and even the construction of a road. Hebrew is among the subjects taught.

Critics are not disarmed. They concede that buildings are going up, wells are being dug and physical facilities improved. It is the nature and Jewishness of the entire operation they call into question, as contrary to Falasha character and tradition and desires of the Falashas themselves, and its efficacy. The very mixing of Jew and non-Jew, some claim, is an abomination in the Falasha view. The operation will bring about an integration meaning the end of Falasha identity as it has existed to date, they say.

In the meantime, the ORT program in Gondar is steadily reaching out to more and more Falashas. The authorities have invited ORT, also, to consider working in Tigre province. How much ORT will be able to extend its program is not clear. U.S. Aid Program financing is now cut off. U.S.-Ethiopian relations have been deteriorating from an already low point. The Ethiopian government has refused to meet the terms of the Hickenlooper amendment about restitution to the U.S. for assets it took, even though it stood to gain financially many times over by doing this; and this makes it ineligible for certain kinds of U.S. aid. The loss on the U.S. side is being made up by grants from other nations, for this year, but expansion is another matter.



## Policies and Options

When queried about the Falasha issue in the past, Israeli and Jewish Agency officials always had insisted that they were acting behind the scenes and that publicity or outside intervention would be counter-productive and even dangerous. Beginning in 1975, this approach became less and less acceptable to critics in the United States and to Falashas in Israel. By fall, 1979, there were hints of a change in the official Israeli attitude: suggestions were made that cautious, non-publicized intervention by Jewish groups might be helpful. Falashas in Israel and American supporters again took to public demonstration in October and November. In a volte-face, the Jewish Agency called for a public campaign on behalf of the Falashas. The government, more moderate, asked for assistance in seeking to influence the Ethiopian government.

Premier Begin, it was known, already had sought to have a letter on Falashas delivered to Mengistu some months before. He had refused to receive it, but it finally did get to his Foreign Minister. Now the Israelis have approached several governments with which it has relations, and which also have relations with Ethiopia, to ask their intercession. The Ethiopian regime, it must be remembered, is a touchy one indeed, to put matters euphemistically. Outside intervention is not always appreciated: on one occasion it brought about the release of one European who had been jailed... and then his immediate murder. Ethiopia scornfully has rejected human rights protests by Amnesty and various church groups. It denounced January, 1979 accounts appearing in the Israeli press about the Falashas plight, asserting in an Addis Ababa communique that it was the Haile Selassie government that had oppressed Falashas, while it had helped them. The Ethiopian embassy in Mexico attacked a broadcast about the Falashas by AJC's Marc Tanenbaum, reprinted in Spanish, in much the same vein. The fact of the matter is, too, that--emigration apart--the attitude of the Mengistu regime and local Ethiopian authorities to Falashas has been a positive one.

A source of much argument has been the fate of five Falasha teachers working in the ORT program, one of whom was killed and four others jailed by the authorities in December, 1978. According to one version, they and another teacher who fled were denounced to the government authorities at the instigation of a particularly resented Christian aliya employee of ORT, as being anti-governmental and promoting aliya. According to another version, the ORT teacher who fled did leave incriminating anti-government documents behind, while the others had lists of persons getting aid which the authorities mistook for something more pernicious. The four--Gedalia Uria, Yosef Zebadia, Noah Reuven and Askenau (Yaacov) Sendekah)--recently were moved from jail to a re-education camp, and hopefully will be released in not too many months.

The record shows, at the same time, that the Mengistu regime was ready to let Falashas fly out to Israel when arms were flying in, prior to the Dayan statement of February, 1978. The key question is, then: Can it again be persuaded to permit such movement and is there anything that might be helpful in getting it to agree? A corollary question is: May the very intervention on this score cause any difficulties for the on-going aid program in Ethiopia? Falashas in Israel discount this last--the government already knows Falasha messianic attitudes towards Israel, they say--but others are less sanguine.



Ethiopian sensitivity apart, one must recognize that there is little leverage one can bring to bear. Ethiopian Marxist-style denunciation of the U.S. is routine; it voted with the Soviets on Afghanistan. U.S.-Ethiopian relations, as noted, are already low indeed. Nor can the Ethiopians be very happy with the idea that the U.S. shortly may be establishing a major military base in Berera, in Somalia, its enemy. Critics contend that Israel could swing a deal for emigration by using its existing contacts in Ethiopia, an assertion more easily made than demonstrable. However right they may be about opportunities missed by Israel in the past, or past Israeli unwillingness to act, it does not follow that Israel is able, today, to bring about emigration.

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The shift in the Israel position last November may not satisfy critics of its Falasha policy, but it has made possible some cooperation. In Israel, a new inter-ministerial committee has been set up including Foreign Office, Jewish Agency and other key persons, and there is also Falasha representation. In the United States, the NJCRAC established a committee headed by Dan Shapiro, a former president of AJC's New York Chapter, in which all views are represented.

There has been, at this last, tentative agreement on the following:

-- That there should be no attack of any kind on the Mengistu regime, since this only could be dangerous.

-- That without the consent of the Mengistu regime, there could be no sizeable emigration. The number of those able to "walk out" to the Sudan or otherwise be helped to depart was put, at best, at two or three thousand, given conditions there. One should therefore probe to see what approaches could be made to the Mengistu regime, without any publicity.

-- That any approach put forward be on the humanitarian grounds of family reunion: there may only be 300 Falashas in Israel, but the Falasha (and Ethiopian) concept of family is a very wide one. That another approach be to test whether there could be granting of visas by the Ethiopians for purposes of study by Falashas outside the country.

-- That the effort should be made to interest U.S. Congressmen and administration officials in the plight of the Falashas. There is some belief that the Ethiopian regime may be interested in grain, and the Congressmen would be sounded out whether they would be ready to support giving this. (This may not contravene the Hickenlooper amendment, since U.S. humanitarian action is not affected by it. On the other hand, this suggestion was put forward before the Afghanistan crisis.)

-- Despite some reluctance, the critics of Israel now have agreed to make available to the Israelis both their lists of Falashas they assert are in the Sudan, for checking purposes, and names of their contacts who, they claim, can help bring people out.

-- That there be an educational campaign concerning Falashas among the Jewish community by the Jewish establishment. This, it is recognized, will not be without problems. It is not easy to explain that we are against Mengistu's policy on emigration, but

do not wish to attack Mengistu. Nor--as was pointed out by some participants in a meeting about Falashas at the NJCRAC meeting in Philadelphia--is there any clear sense of what Jewish communities are supposed to do, once educated, unless it be to bring continued pressure on Israel, as the critics would have it.

-- That a Jewish delegation go to Ethiopia, but that the purpose of this be to bring back a picture of how Falashas live. It was not thought wise that any prominent Jewish "political" figures be on this delegation, which in any event could only go to Gondar in some welfare-aid context.

#### What Position for AJC?

\*\* It is our sense that, whatever the past record, the Israeli authorities have been seeking to do what they can about Falashas since the Begin government came to office. We should actively, and frequently, discuss with them (we have done so intermittently in the past), but on the assumption of their good will rather than the contrary.

\*\* We have, until now, been helping the American Association for Ethiopian Jews transfer funds to Israel and our Israel office has given some logistical support to the Falashas in Israel seeking to make their point of view better known. (Present Tense magazine has, too, helped present their views.) Such assistance may not be consonant with a future AJC stand should we take issue with Israel's critics, and thus have to be reconsidered.

\*\* We are participating in the NJCRAC committee headed by Dan Shapiro, and are cooperating in the efforts to see whether the U.S. administration or Congressmen can cautiously aid. A meeting has been set up with Jewish congressmen, to be held in Representative Stephen Solarz's office the end of January. At Philadelphia, we participated in a meeting with NSC member David Aaron (who dealt with Mengistu and other Ethiopian leaders some years ago). He expressed interest, and we shall be following up through AJC's Washington office.

\*\* Reports we have had of ORT action in Ethiopia lead us to believe that the program is a useful and valuable one, and should be supported and not attacked. We have been acting on this premise in Jewish intra-communal discussions so far, and will continue to do so should ORT be attacked.

\*\* We shall do all we can to promote Falasha emigration. But action taken must be consonant with a double need: not to damage the favorable attitude of the Mengistu regime to the Falashas in Ethiopia; not to put at risk the one on-going program actually assisting Ethiopians.

If efforts to have the Mengistu regime adopt a more favorable attitude on emigration succeed, present tension inside the Jewish community on the Falasha problem will dissipate. If they do not, we may, and probably will, have to face the crunch of opting for what many will condemn as a "do-nothing" stance, arising out of the judgment--obviously discussable--that dire as the situation is, this is still the best way to protect the Falashas in Ethiopia.

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