

OPINION  
BRET STEPHENS

# Israel's Unfinished Exodus Story

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The entrance to a Jewish cemetery in Addis Ababa.

By [Bret Stephens](#)

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JERUSALEM — When Sigal Kanotopsky was a child, her family left their mountain-ringed Jewish village in northern Ethiopia to make a five-and-a-half-week trek to Sudan. They traveled only at night for safety, using the cover of forests to sleep during the day. On the way the family lost Sigal's 3-year-old brother, Negusie, and buried him by the side of the road.

In Sudan, which had struck a secret deal with Israel to let Ethiopian Jews come, they lived for six months in a refugee camp near the city of Gedarf. What Sigal, whose birth name was Mihireta Wuvie, now remembers from the camp were the corpses, as many as two dozen a day, being collected from house to house as people were lost to hunger or disease. In all, an estimated 4,000 Ethiopian Beta Israel, or House of Israel, died on the way from Ethiopia to Sudan.

It was the early 1980s, a period of bitter famine and intense repression in Ethiopia under the communist dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam. But the Wuvie family was relatively prosperous and had not been forced to flee. They left because they were Jews, and knew their real home lay elsewhere.

“Our state of mind wasn’t ‘next year in Jerusalem,’” Kanotopsky explained, citing the closing refrain of every Passover dinner. “It was, at any moment, we might start on our way. When they heard that there was a way to Jerusalem, it was only a rumor — leave your villages, go to Sudan. For my parents, it was enough to go.”



“If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning,” reads an image on the wall of a Jewish community center in Ethiopia.



Sigal Kanotopsky.

On a Friday in early December — she knows the date because it was the Sabbath night of Hanukkah — a man abruptly opened the door to their little house in the refugee camp and said: “You’re still here?” Her father, Melesie, immediately ordered the family to leave everything and make their way to a half-forested area, at the edge of a primitive runway.

“I remember total silence,” she says. “Even the babies realized this was a special moment.” Then a plane landed, its seats removed to make way for as many passengers as possible. Within hours, they were in Israel — the fulfillment of a communal dream that, according to legend, had begun nearly 3,000 years earlier, with the union of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba and the birth of their child, King Menelik I of Ethiopia.

**Kanotopsky, who is now 46** and works for the Jewish Agency for Israel, told me her life story a few weeks ago as we sat aboard an Ethiopian Airlines jet flying from Addis Ababa to Tel Aviv. With us on the plane were 111 Ethiopian immigrants to Israel, who are among the very last of the 5,000 Ethiopians that the Jewish state has agreed to welcome since 2020 in the name of family reunification, with the requirement that they have at least one first-degree relative (parent, sibling or child) already in Israel. By June, this chapter of aliyah, Jewish immigration to Israel, will end, and this door to Ethiopians will be closed, at least for now.

The problem is, there are still anywhere from 9,000 to 12,000 people in Ethiopia who practice Judaism and believe themselves to be Jews — even if the state of Israel believes their familial ties to Judaism are too weak.



Jerusalem Desalgen, 12, at a Jewish community center in Ethiopia.

The Ethiopian aliyah is in many ways one of the most inspiring episodes in Israel's modern history — and, in some ways, among the most frustrating. There's a rich historical debate as to whether the Beta Israel descended from ancient Israelites or were a more recent breakaway sect of Ethiopian Christians who decided to return to the old-time religion. Whichever way, it's an ancient community. There are reliable contemporaneous accounts of the Beta Israel from the 1480s, and the community began to suffer from state-sanctioned religious persecution from the 17th century onward, including a prohibition on owning land. This led Ethiopian Jews to take up occupations like blacksmithing and pottery — an association with fire that helped further stoke anti-Jewish bigotries about their connection to evil.

In 1973, Ovadia Yosef, who was then the chief Sephardic rabbi, ruled that the Beta Israel were Jews who should be brought to Israel. Seven years later, the Mossad (with crucial U.S. help, notably from George H.W. Bush) began bringing Ethiopian Jews to Sudan and then exfiltrating them to Israel in two large operations, Moses (1983-85) and Solomon (1991).

One of the heroes of both dramas is Micha Feldmann, 79, a gentle and charmingly self-deprecating Israeli whom I met in Addis and who was long the Jewish Agency's point man for Ethiopian Jewry. He is affectionately known to them as "Abba Micha" — father Micha.

"I held the corpse of a girl 12 years old," he recalls of the earliest rescue flights. "Because first we flew out the sick and the old, and then the young. You can imagine how I felt." In 1990 he returned to Addis to lead the Jewish Agency Mission to Ethiopia, running a staff of 16 people as they dealt with an influx of thousands of Beta Israel streaming into the capital as it was under siege from rebel forces. "The rains began. The sewage came up. People started dying. We opened a school on the embassy campus for 4,000 children, not so much to teach them but to save them from the streets and give them an extra meal according to what the doctors suggested."



In May 1991, American Jewish donors came up with what amounted to a \$35 million bribe to the Mengistu regime to let the Jews go. The Israelis were given a single weekend to get it done. In the space of 36 hours, 14,325 Beta Israel were flown to Israel, including, in one case, 1,086 passengers on a Boeing 747, plus a baby born midair. It holds the record for the most people ever to fly aboard a single plane.

Even after 32 years, it's hard to be unmoved by [old footage of the operation](#) — the best possible reminder that Israel, whatever else is said about or against it, has been a refuge for the vulnerable and a beacon for the oppressed. It was hard to be unmoved again as our flight touched the ground and the passengers spontaneously broke into singing “Am Yisrael Chai” (“The Nation of Israel Lives”).



Among the families on the plane was that of Atalay Worku, who has waited for 26 years to be reunited with his mother while he stayed behind to work as a farmhand and, with his wife, Yirachu, raise their five children, ages 12 to 24. On the night before the trip, I asked Atalay what Israel meant to him: “Family, happiness, a place of faith, a place to prosper, a place where people are united.”

**It didn't seem** my place to tell him that at least some of his expectations for his new home were unlikely to be fulfilled.

When Kanotopsky was on the march to Sudan, her father had assured her that there was neither sickness nor death in the Holy Land. He died within 18 months of arriving. “The moment I heard it, I just ran away,” she recalls. “I couldn't absorb the idea that I lost my father in Jerusalem.”

Most immigration stories to Israel are hard, but the Beta Israel story is harder than any other. Part of this is due to an uncomfortable but unmissable fact: Most Ethiopians arrive in Israel from exceptionally isolated and impoverished circumstances. Unlike, say, Jewish newcomers from Kyiv or Moscow, they don't come with Ph.D.s in mathematics, lacking only fluency in Hebrew to transfer their skills to Israel's high-tech economy.



Addis Ababa.

For Ethiopian men especially, accustomed to traditional patriarchal family structures, the move to Israel can be brutal: They struggle with Hebrew, rarely manage to get anything better than janitorial work and are silently humiliated by wives with better-paying domestic work and daughters who are quick to embrace Israel's expansive social freedoms.

What about that second uncomfortable but unmissable fact — namely, that they are Black? Liat Demoze, who also came to Israel from Ethiopia as a child in the 1980s, told me she “didn’t feel like I was being discriminated against. I did feel like I was different.” Israeli officials like to stress the investment they put into every Ethiopian immigrant, including yearslong stays in absorption centers and enormous subsidies for mortgage payments.

Yet there is also a heavy dose of paternalism in mainstream Israeli attitudes toward Beta Israel, reminiscent of the mistreatment and social discrimination faced by Jews who came from Arab lands in the 1950s. One example: In Ethiopia, names mean something — Atalay Worku’s eldest son’s name, Workineh, means “you are the gold.” But Ethiopians were all but required to take new names on their arrival, as a way of “becoming Israeli.”



“You got off the plane and someone said, ‘Let’s call you Yossi instead of Fantahoun from now on,’” the Jewish Agency’s Danyelle Neuman explained to me, emphasizing that the practice ended in the late 1990s. To some extent this recalls the tales, [apparently apocryphal](#), of Ellis Island immigration officers Anglicizing difficult or exotic names they couldn’t be bothered to spell. But it suggests how little use many Israelis have for the culture and customs Ethiopians bring with them.

**A more telling** example is the attitude that many Israelis have toward those who remain in Ethiopia. For the most part, they are relatives of a secondary group of Ethiopian Jews, widely known as the Falash Mura (though the term is considered derogatory within the Ethiopian community), whose forebears were converted to Christianity by European missionaries in the 19th century but who later returned to their ancestral faith. In 2002, Rabbi Yosef also declared that they deserved to be treated as Jews on grounds that their previous conversion to Christianity had been made under duress.

That ruling allowed thousands of additional Ethiopians to come, bringing the total Israeli population of Ethiopian-born Jews to around 95,000, plus 70,000 or so of their Israel-born progeny. For a state that is constantly worried about shoring up the percentage of Jews living within its borders, this ought to be seen as an unqualified blessing.

But not to all Israelis. Bezalel Smotrich, the far-right firebrand who is now Israel’s finance minister, responded to a 2018 Knesset decision to admit an additional 1,000 Ethiopians as if it were a terrifying opening to unlimited immigration of undesirables from Africa. “This practice will develop into a demand to bring more and more family members not included in the Law of Return,” he said, referring to the Israeli law that grants automatic citizenship to anyone with at least one Jewish grandparent. “It will open the door to an endless extension of a family chain from all over the world.”

The sentiment, which has also been pointed [at Russians with tenuous Jewish ties](#), is shared among more liberal-minded Israelis, in part because previous Israeli governments have declared the conclusive finale of Ethiopian Jewry, most recently in 2013. “I was there twice to cover the emigration of the ‘last Jews’ to Israel, and each time thousands more appeared,” one seasoned Israeli journalist told me, asking not to be named to speak frankly.

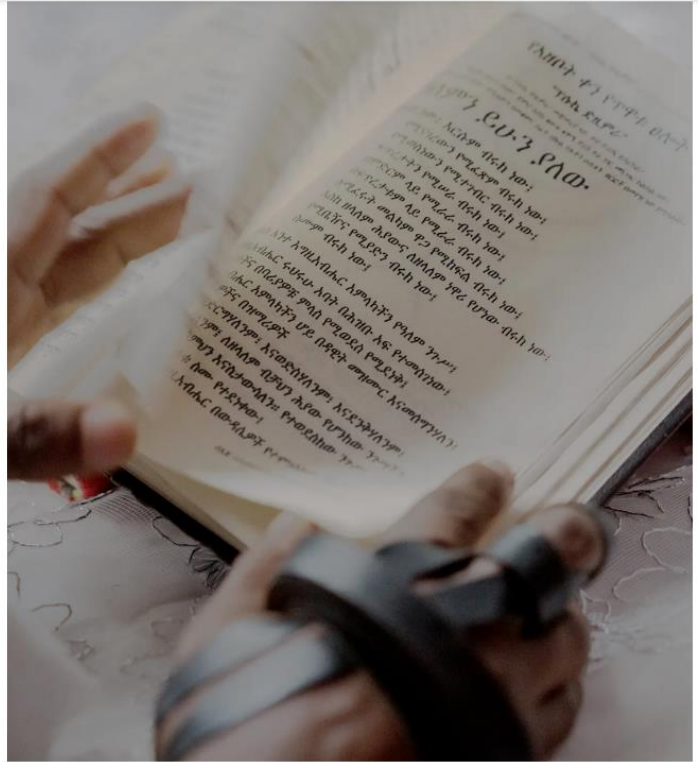
It is almost surely the case that there are at least some who are simply taking advantage of [the social services](#) (including free food) provided to the Jewish communities in Addis and the provincial city of Gondar. The prospect of a ticket to a comparatively rich country is a bright lure, though it’s hard not to guffaw at the thought that the same right-wing Israeli politicians who fear they might take in a handful of Ethiopian freeloaders seem to have fewer compunctions at the vastly more costly freeloading that is the stock in trade of Israel’s ultra-Orthodox politicians.

As it is, freeloading certainly wasn’t the case for Zimam Abanora Girmay, who has had relatives in Israel since Operation Solomon. I met her with her husband, three daughters and one grandchild in their ramshackle one-room house in Addis, where they had come after being displaced by the intense fighting in Tigray Province.





Zimam Abanora Girmay and her family.



A Hebrew-Amharic prayer book.

“When the war started, it was horrible,” Abanora said. “We had to hide in a forest. Then we found that soldiers had ransacked our home.” Learning that they might be eligible to make aliyah, they walked for four days to the Tigrayan city of Shire and then made their way to Addis. As for Israel, “I have no idea whether it’s going to be easy and smooth or the most difficult thing I’ve done in my life,” she said. “Our dream is very simple: to find our family healthy and be reunited with them.”

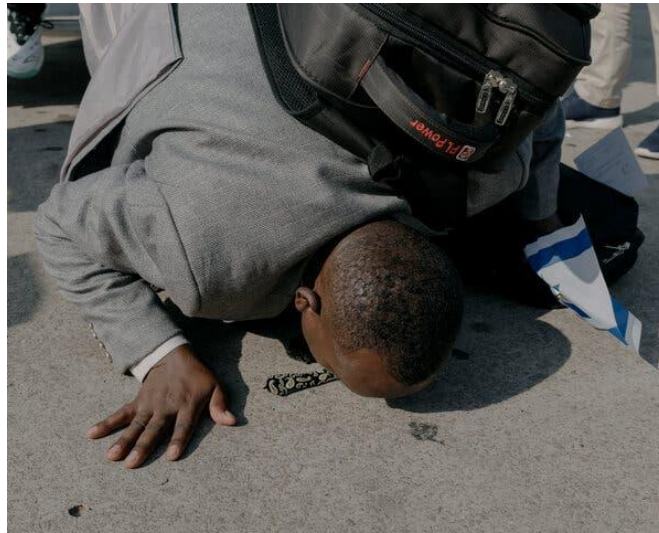
Abanora and her family are due to arrive in Israel next month. As for the less lucky members of the community — those whose relatives in Israel are cousins and aunts, not brothers and parents — they have been waiting and worshipping in the vicinity of a tin-roofed synagogue for years, sometimes decades. Sitting on benches with them as they followed a siddur printed in Hebrew and Amharic, I couldn’t help but think of the sharp contrast between their clearly sincere religious fervor and the lukewarm or indifferent Judaism of mainstream American Jewry. Why those American Jews, most of whom have no interest in making aliyah, should have a greater claim on Israel’s welcome mat than the Ethiopians I met in that humble but warm synagogue struck me as a question worth asking.

Eventually, I suspect, Israel will bring them all back — all *home* — but only, I fear, when they are once again threatened by war or famine or some other catastrophe. Another question worth asking, this time of Israeli decision makers: Why wait till then?

**The flight from** Addis to Tel Aviv took about four hours. At some point, it occurred to me that I wasn’t so much on a plane as I was on a time machine, albeit one moving in different directions at once.

In one sense, the Ethiopians on the plane were zooming forward in time, at least socially, technologically and economically speaking. From a world of tenant farming in a provincial and mountainous part of Africa, they were arriving to the land of Waze and PillCams and autonomous driving. It was a leap from the 11th century to the 21st. In another sense, they were moving backward, from the 21st to the 10th century B.C.E. — not to a nation-state called Israel but rather to a mythological city called Jerusalem, locus of their religious devotion

for generations. They were experiencing Jewishness in perhaps its deepest sense, as a condition in which origin and destiny, memory and aspiration, are nearly indistinguishable.



On the plane, I was also reminded that, in 1918, as my great-grandmother fled Moscow and the Bolsheviks who had murdered her husband, she, too, lost a child, a 3-year-old boy named Isa. He's buried in the Latvian port city of Libau, a way station in my own family's three-decade-long exodus story. Whether from Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Russia, Poland or Germany, there are eerie resemblances in almost every Jewish family's story of escaping persecution — a story that ought to unite us as Jews and that obligates us as human beings.

Ofir Berman is a photographer based in Tel Aviv.

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**A correction was made on May 26, 2023:**

An earlier version of this column referred incorrectly to practices at Ellis Island. Immigration officers did not Anglicize people's names upon entry into the United States.

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Bret Stephens has been an Opinion columnist with The Times since April 2017. He won a Pulitzer Prize for commentary at The Wall Street Journal in 2013 and was previously editor in chief of The Jerusalem Post.

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