

The State of Ethiopian Jews in Israel: Seamless Integration or Subtle Exclusion?

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ABSTRACT

Studies on the Ethiopian Jews, also known as Beta Israel, have increasingly focused on the underlying correlation between their unique identity of Jewishness, rooted in an African state, and their being accepted as Jews in Israel. Also, a significant portion of the research brings to light the social and economic forces that compelled them to emigrate from the Horn of Africa country to the Middle Eastern state. However, what seems to be lacking in the scholarship is a serious inquiry into how a black Jewish community can be fully integrated in the long-term into an Israeli society that is predominantly non-black, as well as the extent to which their assimilation can be either impeded or facilitated due to the racial dynamics peculiar to a black minority. A fundamental question, therefore, is whether integration would be seamless, irrespective of race, for the Beta Israel, as has been for other Diaspora Jewish immigrants. The paper tries to answer this question using existing assimilation theories. At the same time, this author argues that, while being subjected to racial discrimination in the short term, the future of the Ethiopian Jews would be one of having a positively-impacting presence in the Jewish state; this is to say that their potential of becoming a political force could be far-reaching, owing to their growing population count in Israel, a country that has a very small population (6.5 million) compared to many other states around the globe. This potential is further buttressed by mounting Ethiopian cultural manifestations already in the daily lifestyle of the Israeli society. Even more importantly, their potential influence in the foreign policy arena, particularly as this pertains to the strategic interest of Israel in Ethiopia, and the Horn of Africa generally, could be enormous and lasting. The latter influence could come from the Beta Israel community's strong attachment to Ethiopia, not only because it is the country of their origin but also it is where they are viewed with much envy as future investors and tourists in a state that has one of the fastest growing economies in Africa. So, the Ethiopian Israelis in effect could serve as a bond between Israel and Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Studies on the Ethiopian Jews in Israel have increasingly focused on the underlying correlation between their unique identity of Jewishness, rooted in an African state, and their being accepted as Jews in Israel. To a large extent, a significant portion of the research brings to light the social and economic forces that compelled them to emigrate from the Horn of Africa country to the Middle Eastern state (Feldman, 2012). In spite of the *raison d'être* for their mass exodus from Ethiopia, the settlement of the Ethiopian Jews in Israel is still viewed as consistent with the state of Israel's Law of Return, which gives Jews and their children automatic rights regarding residency and Israeli citizenship.

At the same time, more recent scholarly efforts have revealed the pitfalls of racial discrimination

that have faced the *Beta Israel*, the official name used in Israel to identify the Ethiopian Jews, since their arrival in the Jewish state starting in 1977 but mostly in 1984 and later on in 1991. Fascinated by the exceptionality of a black Jewish community in Israel---approximately 150,000 strong residing there currently--- both social science researchers and students of Ethiopian Jewry have studied and analyzed the multitude of issues facing them as they strive to assimilate fully into the Israeli society (Zelalem, 2016).

However, what seems to be lacking in the scholarship is a serious inquiry into how a black Jewish community can be fully integrated in the long-term into an Israeli society that is predominantly non-black, as well as the extent to which their assimilation can be either impeded or facilitated due to the racial dynamic

peculiar to a black minority. In this regard, a fundamental question would be whether their racial distinctiveness as well as being a minority in the larger Israeli social undercurrents could cause a lingering divide between them and the rest of their Jewish brethren. Stated differently, would integration be seamless, irrespective of race, for the Beta Israel, as has been for other Diaspora Jewi shimmi grants? Historically, for many people of Jewish ancestry outside Israel, a coveted return to the Land of Israel through the “*Aliyah*” --- immigration of Jews to Israel--- either as individuals or groups, has remained a lifetime dream. Yet, for the Beta Israel, particularly, the road to full integration into the Israeli society has been bumpy so far despite that dream.

So, the overriding purpose of this paper is to review research on the status of the Ethiopian Jews in Israel. First and foremost, the study bids to answer the questions raised above, while illuminating new insights into a topic that has been given only scant attention in the literature. In addition to discussing briefly the historical narrative of the Beta Israel, their “*Aliyah*” to the land of Israel starting in mid-1980s, and the extent to which their assimilation has been hampered by racial and other forms of discrimination, the study explores ways in which the Beta Israel can have a positively-impacting presence in the Jewish state; this is to say that their potential of becoming a political force could be far-reaching, owing to their growing population count in Israel, a country that has a very small population (6.5 million) compared to many other states around the globe. This potential is further buttressed by mounting Ethiopian cultural manifestations already in the daily lifestyle of the Israeli society. Even more importantly, their potential influence in the foreign policy arena, particularly as this pertains to the strategic interest of Israel in Ethiopia, and the Horn of Africa generally, could be far-reaching and lasting. The latter influence could come from the Beta Israel community’s strong attachment to Ethiopia, not only because it is the country of their origin but also it is where they are viewed with much envy as future investors and tourists in a country that has one of the fastest growing economies in Africa. So, the Ethiopian Israelis in effect could serve as a bond between Israel and Africa.

The paper is organized into four sections. The first part provides a brief overview of the historical background tracing the Beta Israel’s

link to Ethiopia from the ancient times to present. The second section discusses the prominent theories advanced to explain assimilation as a social paradigm. In this connection, existing theories will be put to the test to demonstrate any relevance to the study of the Ethiopian Jews---the subject area of this investigation. This is followed by a case study of the Beta Israel, reviewing the empirical evidence on the Ethiopian Jewish community’s mass exodus from the Horn of African country to Israel and the integrative stages characterizing their absorption into their adopted country. Some of the issues that confront the Ethiopian Jews currently in their social and political existence as immigrants of a black minority will be assessed. The final section attempts to suggest scenarios in which the Beta Israel can overcome their disadvantaged socio-political and economic status as they move forward to full integration into the life of Israel. The conclusion suggests the directions of future research on the subject under investigation.

ETHIOPIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY IN THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The narrative about the origin of the Beta Israel is one that was argued exhaustively for many years in the works of prominent scholars (Kaplan, 1995; Shelemy, 1989; Waldron, 1993); however, the debate has nearly fallen silent since the arrival of the Ethiopian Jews in Israel following especially the two Israeli covert military operations, code-named *Operation Moses* (1984-1988) and *Operation Solomon* (1991), which were carried out secretly to relocate the Beta Israel community from Ethiopia to Israel. Over a span of 7 years (1984-1991), the secret military missions airlifted thousands of them from the Horn of Africa country for settlement in the Middle Eastern state. Preceding the secret airlifts was the 1977 declaration, put into effect by the Israeli government, allowing the expatriation of the Beta Israel from Ethiopia in accord with the *Law of Return*. That decision was consistent with the ruling of Rabbi Ovadia Yousef in 1973, validating the Beta Israel’s historical right as Jews to immigrate to the Land of Israel. Rabbi Yousef, who died in 2013, was a passionate figure in Israeli politics as the spiritual leader of the ultra-Orthodox Shas Party, known for championing the cause of Jews of Middle Eastern and North African origin (Yosef, 1973).

For years, the story of the Ethiopian Jewish community and their mass exodus from Ethiopia

to the Holy Land has captured the curiosity and imagination of scholars and the media in ways that no other immigrant groups have. Several historical explanations have been advanced to establish the true narrative of their origin. One version of the theory maintains that they were "...descendants of the tribe of Dan or other tribes exiled by the Babylonians..." (Isseroff, 2020). In other words, they were Jews who left the Kingdom of Judah, the Biblical Kingdom where Judeans were believed to have composed the contents of the Hebrew Bible, for Egypt in the wake of the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonian army in 586 B.C. Still another version of the narrative postulates that the Beta Israel were rather descendants of Jews who accompanied Menelik I, the son of the mythical King of Israel---Solomon--- and of the Ethiopian legendary Queen of Sheba (Smith, 2016). Yet, the most unconventional of the theories conjectures that the Ethiopian Jews were indigenous Christians who converted to Judaism and so their claim to have Jewish ancestry is "just a matter of myth and legend" (Genetic Literacy Project, 2012 – 2019). The following probably best describes the divergence of the theories about concerning the Beta Israel's Jewish originality or lack thereof:

The ancestry of this group is unclear; theories range that they descend from the lost tribe of Dan, which settled in Egypt during the period of the Divided Kingdom; from the son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, though no mention of a marriage or sexual relations between them appears in the biblical text; from a community who settled in Egypt following the destruction of the First Temple; or from Ethiopian non-Jews who converted. Despite this uncertain lineage, the Beta Israel have been living in Ethiopia for centuries, unheard of in the outside world, and not knowing themselves that other Jewish communities existed (Zelalem, 2016, 1).

While these conflicting theories have failed to lead to an emerging scholarly consensus on the true genesis of the Ethiopian Jews, however, the debate may have become irrelevant at this point considering their recognition as Jews by the Israeli government. Still, as a footnote to this discussion, this writer argues that the validity of whether the Beta Israel were Jewish descendants, who had lived in Ethiopia for centuries isolated from the rest of their kins in the Holy Land, must be further examined through the lens of their fellow Ethiopians back in the old country, with whom their ancestors

had co-existed for many generations. As much as the extant literature concerning the Beta Israel has been written by non-Ethiopian experts, it is just as important to seek insights from those scholars that are indigenous to the country of their origin---Ethiopia. In fact, foreign scholars could have less advantage in collecting the true and reliable historical facts in Ethiopia than scholars of Ethiopian background could. Moreover, the insights of foreign scholars might even be colored by such factors as language barriers, lack of cultural sensitivities, and other logistical constraints associated with being alien to the land---all possibly leading to a misrepresentation of some important elements of history.

As an Ethiopian academic myself who spent most of my adolescent years with members of the Beta Israel community in towns and villages of northern Ethiopia, I grew up in a society, where oral narrations told by village elders and wise men living in distant rural communities, was simply taken as valid historical facts, and it was rather customary then to accept a storytelling that was passed from one generation to another as part of one's history. The main advantage of an oral history is that many centuries down the line, the story remains exactly as first told, even if scholars tend not to believe it. It is therefore plausible to draw attention to this line of argument at this point to give more credence to the account that the Beta Israel were in fact Jewish descendants, contrary to those scholars' assertion that they were not.

With my background, I was privileged to know that my own father was a storyteller adept at dissecting genealogy, tracing families from generations to generations with amazing details, while providing insights not only into the bloodline of his own family but those of others in the communities nearby, including those from far-off localities. Based on this experience and personal observations, I have come to realize rather quickly that many Christian families in the northern part of Ethiopia, where the Beta Israel communities had existed for generations, proudly declare their affinities, justifiably or not, to Israel and particularly to the Holy sites in Jerusalem. This theme may be rationalized on several interrelated historical contexts regarding Ethiopia.

Throughout history, Ethiopians, particularly of the northern parts of the country, speak languages that are a derivative of a Semitic language family, also known as Afro-Asiatic,

the most prominent of which are Arabic, Aramaic, Hebrew, and Ethiopian languages of the Semitic category. Although this in itself may not prove any direct hereditary ties between Ethiopians and Jews, however, it still adds to the unique history of Ethiopia among other African countries south of Sahara, both in its proximity to the Middle East as well as its historical ties over generations to the people of both Africa and the Middle East.

At the same time, Ethiopia's **exceptionalism**, a notion explaining the condition of being different from the norm especially of a nation or region, may also shed some light on this subject and provide a better understanding of history not only literally and contextually but also inclusive of cultural heritages. Thus, scholars must start examining the facts about the Beta Israel through the prism of these historical anomalies about Ethiopia: the country has the only written language in Africa excluding Arabic; a solar calendar that has 12 months of 30 days, plus five (six if it is a leap year) other days that make a 13th month. The first day of a new year in Ethiopia is September 11 in the Gregorian calendar, except when it is a leap year, then it is September 12; the daily time pattern is also unique in that there are 12 hours between sunrise and sunset all through the year; Ethiopia is the only country that escaped European colonialism in Africa; the country had emperors who had built churches and monasteries in Jerusalem and other parts of Israel centuries ago, which is extraordinary in itself; for instance, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewhadeo Church has maintained a rare presence in one of Christianity's holiest sites—the *Church of the Holy Sepulcher* of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem. Such presence at a site where many others have not had the privilege of possession of a monastery adds to that country's exceptionality while making Ethiopia as the only black people owning properties at the Holy sites in Jerusalem; and, more importantly, Ethiopia is the only country in the world that claims to have custody of the original *Ark of the Covenant* in the church of Saint Mary of Zion, a religious sanctuary in the town of Axum, Tigre, northern Ethiopia. According to archeology and legend, the *Ark of the Covenant*, known in Ethiopia as the *Tables of the Law*, contains the *Ten Commandments* God gave Moses high atop Mount Sinai. While some scholars still doubt the validity of this legend, Ethiopians and particularly believers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewhedo Church, more than 45 million strong, never doubt about the

authenticity of the Ark's presence in Ethiopia (Aleteia, 2016).

Given the a fore mentioned historical facts that define Ethiopia in relative terms, one is therefore inclined to reason that these particulars could be, along with other cultural manifestations, the basis for understanding holistically why the Ethiopian Jews came to be who they say they are--the descendants of Israelites. The truth to their claim of being the "original Jews" may be found in the intricate details of Ethiopian exceptionalism so described in the preceding paragraphs. And yet the scientific proof that scholars, who doubt the authenticity of this narrative, are looking for may never be realized. Nonetheless, for the Beta Israel particularly and their fellow Ethiopians in general, the proof is not only the oral history they inherited from their ancestors about this narrative, but the series of historical events surrounding Ethiopia's exceptionalism that give credence to the Beta Israel's Jewish originality. The following quotation might probably best describe this same view in its totality:

The People of Ethiopia, Jewish and Christian, share the belief that they are descendants of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, through their son Menelik, who returned to Ethiopia with his attendants after studying in Jerusalem. Supposedly, they brought with them the original tablets of the Law of Moses, purloined from the temple of Solomon, which are hidden in the city of Axum (Yosef, 2013, 2).

Given the backdrop of the foregoing brief historical highlights, we are now to the point of focusing on the theoretical perspectives that are necessary to shed light on the nature and process of the Beta Israel's integration into an Israeli society, which is radically different from what they left behind in their native land--Ethiopia. As such, the discussion that follows is intended to lay the ground for the theoretical understanding of the Ethiopian immigrants' absorption into Israel, using *as simulation* as a frame of reference in this investigation.

THE THEORETICAL CONTEXT OF THE BETA ISRAEL'S ABSORPTION INTO ISRAEL

The Ethiopian Jews, albeit their absorption as citizens through a legally sanctioned resettlement program (*Law of Return*) into the land of Israel, are no more or less than any other immigrants that go through a similar process of assimilation into a new country, with all its promises and uncertainties. In this connection,

studies on the causes of immigration and any related issues affecting immigrants' integration into the mainstream of the destination country have been studied for years by sociologists and other social scientists almost to the extent of what one may regard as "overkill." Even so, the richness of the literature on the subject still offers an opportunity to tap into existing theories that have been developed by such scholars, and so this study pivots now toward examining them and their relevance to the subject of this inquiry.

Three theories of assimilation have come to dominate the literature on immigration over the decades. At this juncture, however, defining assimilation contextually may be a sound starting point. *Assimilation* in its elemental import is the process through which an immigrant group gets to internalize, through the various stages of adaptation, a host country's societal values, political orientations, and economic manifestations over time while giving up those of its own, although not in absolute terms. The ultimate purpose of assimilation therefore is for the immigrants to become undistinguishable, theoretically that is, over a generation or generations in their action and behaviors to members of the mainstream society, of which they are attempting to be a part. Likewise, as described by Brown and Bean, as simulation can be perceived as "... the process by which the characteristics of members of immigrant groups and host societies come to resemble one another. The process, which has both economic and socio-cultural dimensions, begins with the immigrant generation and continues through the second generations and beyond" (2006, 1).

The theories derived from research to explain the process of assimilation can be classified into three types: the *classic as simulation model*, the *racial/ethnic disadvantage model*, and the *segmented as simulation model*. Classic assimilation, the earliest of the three models that scholars used to analyze European immigrants' absorption into the U.S. in the early 20th century, postulates that the U.S. could become a "melting pot," with immigrants becoming fully integrated progressively and predictably, leading to "...a homogenous Anglo-Protestant American culture and society" (Bermudez, 2014, 1). This theory, also known as "*straight-line*" model in much of the immigrant assimilation literature, assumed that each immigrant, regardless of race and background, can be transformed into an American. While the theory may have had its

value in its days, however, it has lost its explanatory power for a country such as the U.S., which has increasingly become over the decades a multi cultural, multiethnic, and multi-religious society. More importantly, this model would be even more irrelevant to any society, including that of Israel, which is diverse culturally, ethnically, racially and religiously. With no doubt, acceptance of diversity and multiculturalism, which has increasingly become the driving force behind all forms of group relations in American society these days, including the workplace at all levels, makes this model practically obsolete, if not unworthy of scholarly merit. Critics even argue that an "Angelo-conformist" model, which the classic assimilation theory is regarded as by its critics, depicting immigrant groups "...as conforming to unchanging, middle-class, white values," would definitely be out of touch with current realities not only in the U.S. but also in many multicultural societies across the globe (Brown and Bean, 2).

In contrast, the **racial/ethnic disadvantage model** posits that certain racial/ethnic groups find barriers erected against them in the host country as they attempt to gain mobility or advancement in the political and social-economic arenas, thereby thwarting their efforts to integrate successfully over time. Barboza makes this same argument, citing studies by other scholars as evidence, that "...the mere awareness of discrimination will tend to discourage participation in the American polity"(2006,4), (Barboza, 2006). In agreement, Brown and Bean point out that full integration into a host society by racial/ethnic immigrant groups can be stymied due to the special effects of identity, adding that even "...language and cultural familiarity may often not lead to increased assimilation" (2006, 3). By inference, this would simply mean that so long as there is a long-drawn-out history of discrimination within a host country, coupled with institutionalized racial hurdles blocking racial/ethnic groups' upward mobility in all aspects of political and economic competition, complete assimilation will remain a rather impracticable social engineering than a sound blueprint committed to a comprehensive social integration.

So, the challenges faced by racial/ethnic immigrants in the process of integration into the mainstream of a host society can be real and discouraging; however, it would be also misleading not to acknowledge that socioeconomic mobility by newcomers may also

be affected positively by individual achievements some make, which eventually could change societal attitudes toward them and lead to acceptance in the long term by the majority community. Even with this scenario, the identity factor is so overwhelming that only a selected few can be fully assimilated within a span of their own generation, leaving the rest of their fellow immigrants behind. All things considered, the racial/ethnic dynamic appears to have a controlling effect on the level of assimilation that immigrant groups could achieve, owing to manifestations of characteristics and behaviors that are divergent from those of the host society.

The third and last framework of analysis, the *segmented assimilation model*, came to the forefront of scholarly discourse in the 1990s through the works of sociologist Alejandro Portes and others (Portes, 1990; Gans, 1992), setting in motion a paradigm shift in explaining the process of assimilation. A model that has been used primarily to examine the post-1965 immigrants and their children to the U.S., the *segmented assimilation* theory is based on the premise that the process of integration leads immigrants to taking divergent pathways and integrating at different levels of upward or downward mobility in their socio-economic standings, while submerging themselves eventually into a variety of segments of the society of their host country. This, of course, is in contrast with the positive *straight-line* pathway that the *classic assimilation* construct advances, which means that immigrants are likely to lose both their ethnic identity and values gradually and become absorbed into the majority culture while somewhat gaining socio-economic advancement parallel to a white, middle-class social status (Bermudez, 2014, 3).

In a nutshell, the theory of *segmented assimilation* does not foretell an absolutist scenario in which immigrants are to experience a pre-determined outcome in their efforts at all levels of integration, as the other two models seem to suggest. For example, the classic model professes to place immigrants into a “melting pot” of social integration that places the receiving society as the model of emulation at the expense of the immigrants’ identity and of loss of their originality. In the same vein, the racial/ethnic disadvantage model predicts that racial/ethnic particularities are too formidable to allow an orderly, lasting assimilation in a society, where mimicry of the majority culture and way of life without any reciprocal

acknowledgement of those of the immigrants is a *fait accompli*. By contrast, the segmented assimilation model is somewhat prospective so much that it paints the realities of the time in societies that are increasingly becoming diverse and multicultural. In describing this model’s basic premise, Bermudez puts it succinctly as follows:

According to the segmented assimilation framework the outcomes of the incorporation process are not always positive, but mixed, and they depend on both structural and individual factors and the interaction between them.....Structural characteristics of the social contexts immigrants enter such as color (racial-ethnic stratification), location (spatial segregation), and access to mobility layers (economic opportunities) interact with individual-level factors such as parental resources (human, financial, cultural capitals), education, and values, shaping diverse pathways to downward or upward assimilation (2014, 3).

In its basic formulation, therefore, the segmented assimilation theory incorporates some elements of both the classic and racial/ethnic disadvantage models into a framework that explains assimilation in the context of multiple factors—cultural, structural, spatial, economic, human, financial, and educational—that determine the immigrants’ divergent pathways to mobility as well as the ability to join the ranks of different socio-economic groups in society. Still, critics assail this model arguing that by linking economic outcomes to issues of race and ethnicity, the theory neglects the fact that “...there are other constraints like family financial obligations or factors such as lackluster job growth that slow the rate of mobility (Brown and Ben, 2006, 4).

THE BETA ISRAEL AS A CASE STUDY

The Ethiopian Jews lived in the northwestern Ethiopia for a millennium before their relocation to Israel. Most of them were clustered in the northern Gondar Zone, practicing a religion with some of its rituals resembling those of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, but still recognized as an Israelite religion that differs from Rabbinic Judaism. Much of their life in Ethiopia is shrouded in mystery, although they were commonly reported by outsiders as having suffered religious persecution, and a significant portion of the community was forced into conversion into Christianity during the 19th and 20th centuries. While many still maintained

their Jewish religious practices, others became converts and thereby became known as Falasha Mura (Jews converted to Christianity). As the Ethiopian Jews made contacts with other Jewish brethren in the later 20th century, a serious debate about their Jewishness ensued. After halakhic (Jewish law) and constitutional discussions, Israeli officials decided, in 1977, that the Israeli Law of Return was applicable to them, as well. What followed next were the mass airlifts, codenamed *Operations Moses and Solomon* in the 1984 and 1991, respectively.

Given the experience of the Beta Israel so far in their newly adopted country, this section of the paper therefore applies both the *racial/ethnic disadvantage* and *segmented assimilation* assumptions to the Ethiopian Jews to better understand and answer the questions raised about their current status in Israel. The two assimilation perspectives seem to readily offer theoretical insight into both the failings and promises of the Beta Israel's integration process in Israel. Race, and by extension color and national origin, may offer a compelling explanation for the causes of the dissatisfaction that seems to alienate Ethiopian Jews in Israel today, although promises of progress give them some hope for the future, as well.

The Beta Israel through the Prism of the Racial/Ethnic Disadvantage Model

As discussed earlier, the underlying premise of the *racial/ethnic disadvantage model* is that immigrants that have racial characteristics that are fundamentally different from those of the rest of the population in a receiving (host) country are likely to have a difficult time experiencing a smooth and unfettered integration process more so than other immigrants that have similar characteristics to those of the host country. Therefore, it is based on this assumption that the plight of the Ethiopian Jews in Israel must be explored.

Since the arrival of the Beta Israel from their native Ethiopia, the news about their absorption has been more negative than positive. By and large, reports of discrimination, prejudice and in some cases outright racism against them have inundated the news about them, especially lately. The facts below tell the whole story about life of the Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel:

In 2015, the income of an Ethiopian household was 35 percent lower than that of an average household in Israel. More than 35 percent of

Ethiopian Israeli families live under the poverty line in comparison with 18.6 percent of Israeli families in general. Only 5 percent of Ethiopians hold "quality" jobs compared to 33 percent of Jewish Israelis in general. That is changing, however, as more Ethiopians complete higher education: 55 percent of Ethiopian university graduates are employed in high-quality positions, like the figure for the general Jewish population. Salaries of Ethiopian graduates lag, primarily because a large proportion take lower paying jobs in fields such as nursing and teaching. Some activists also complain that young people have to change their names to sound less Ethiopian to get jobs. In 2015, the average spending for Ethiopian Israeli households was 33% less than that of Israeli households in general, in correspondence with the gross income of Ethiopian Israeli households which is approximately 35% lower than Israeli households in general. In the 2013/14 academic year, there were a total of 312,528 university/college students in Israel; 2,785 were Israelis of Ethiopian origin, i.e. Ethiopian Israelis make up 0.9 percent of university/college students while they are 1.5 percent of the population. Higher rates of Ethiopian Israeli women attend university than in the general population – 67.7 percent and 56.8 percent, respectively (BA) (2019, 1) <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-situation-of-ethiopian-jews-in-israel>

Although there are some signs of success with their integration, however, the record has shown a disturbing picture overall. Describing the fate of the Beta Israel in Israel, Mekelberg notes that, "The story of the immigration and absorption of Ethiopian Jews in Israel epitomizes the best and the worst of Israeli society," adding, "...when they arrived in Israel, these distinctive people faced appalling discrimination, racism and a lack of empathy for their hardships in Ethiopia and during their journey to Israel" (2015, 1-2). No doubt that Mekelberg's reference to "distinctive people" here is nothing more than pointing to the race, color and national origin of the Beta Israel.

At the same time, Weilm paints about their status in Israel in a somewhat blended picture, identifying both the intractable social problems that they are still facing and evidence of success in some areas that will give them hope for the future. He states that, "The Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel is beset with troubles, from high unemployment rates to low matriculation

achievements and alcoholism...yet, examples of success abound. The community boasts doctors, lawyers, teachers and businessmen, as well as increasing numbers of university graduates” (2016, 1). Echoing a similar sentiment, Zelalem notes that, “As a group they faced institutional discrimination in the form of restrictions in all aspects of social life as well as common forms of overt racism by citizens,” adding, “This was not simply a matter of basic discrimination it was racism based on skin color” (2016, 3). Zelalem, perhaps more pessimistic about their assimilation into the mainstream Israeli society than other observers, holds a view that, “Recent trends may point towards a bleak future for the absorption of this small group of Africans in a predominantly white state” (2016, 1)

The first sign of trouble for the Beta Israel after relocation came when they were placed in communities far from the center of cities in mobile homes that were inadequately heated in the winter or cooled in the summer; they lived practically in segregated neighborhoods until they were able to adapt to life in a modern, industrialized society, as Israel is, as opposed to the village life they had left behind in Ethiopia. Their initial reception in Israel was somewhat unsettling to describe it mildly, as Israelis were not ready to embrace them as equal because of their unsophisticated, “backward lifestyle,” and even more so because of their racial characteristics that made them relatively distinctive from the rest of the Israeli people of European and Asiatic ancestry. A statement by the then-Director General of the Jewish Agency’s Department of Immigration and Absorption, Yehuda Dominitz, expressing his opposition to the Beta Israel, might best illustrate this very point. Dominitz commented in 1980 that, “[Taking] a Falasha out of his village, it is like taking a fish out of water...I am not in favor of bringing them [to Israel]” (Winchester, 2009, 2). “Falasha” is a reference to the Beta Israel, and it was a name given to them while in Ethiopia. Translated in Amharic, the Ethiopian official language, it means strangers or people without land; the term is regarded as offensive today and therefore no longer in use when referring to the Ethiopian Jews.

From the very start, the Beta Israel’s identity of being Jewish had been the subject of debate and scrutiny, as many questions were raised about whether they would qualify as such. Unlike many other Diaspora Jewish immigrants, such as Russian or European Jews or even those from

Muslim countries in Asia and North Africa, or from countries within the Middle East itself, the Ethiopians had to go through a litany of “identity” verifications as to the genuineness of their claim to be Jewish. Without a doubt, race, color and national origin, among others, may have played a major part in questioning the authenticity of their Jewishness. A chronicle of events from the time their claim to be Jewish was doubted to their eventual acceptance by Israel as Jews provides a cursory of the saga of the Beta Israel as a group, who had yearned for making the *Aliya* to the Land of Israel. It is also appropriate to note here that the Israeli society is composed of Jews from different backgrounds, including *Ashkenazi Jews* from a predominantly East European background and *Sephardi Jews* originating primarily in North Africa and the Middle East. Although different groups have different skin colors, the Ethiopian Jews still stand out for incomparability with others relative to their black skin.

Yet the most unsavory of the experiences that the Ethiopian Jews encountered upon arrival in Israel may have been in the sphere of religion. That happened when the Israeli Rabbinate required the Ethiopians to undergo what seemed to be an “identity cleansing ritual” of immersion in a bath intended to convert the community, which apparently stemmed from having doubts about the genuineness of their Jewish status and practice (Winchester, 2). As humiliating as this action may have been, the Ethiopians tasted the brunt of religious discrimination in Israel during the very initial phase of the assimilation process. An equally shaming experience for the Ethiopian Jews occurred in 1996 when it was reported by the international media that the blood the Beta Israel donated was being discarded by the Israeli authorities fearing that it may have been contaminated with the HIV virus. Serge Schmemmann of *The New York Times* at the time reported, “Thousands of Ethiopian Jews clashed with riot policemen outside the Prime Minister’s office today in a protest over the news that blood they donated was secretly dumped because of fear that it was contaminated with the virus that causes AIDS” (Schmemmann, 1996).

This experience, as expected, caused a great deal of indignation among the Ethiopian Jewish immigrants leading to a protest outside the Prime Minister Shimon Peres’s office and a clash with the police. “Our blood is as red as yours and we are just as Jewish as you are,” displayed one of the many banners the protesters

hoisted while another one declared "Apartheid in Israel". Schmemmann further reported that, "While some of the protesters spoke of specific incidents of racial discrimination, most talked of a broader sense of not feeling accepted. Young soldiers told of being assigned to guard duty on nights when there were parties" (1996, 1). This tragedy comes on the heels of another incident that garnered international attention and generated the most damaging publicity for the Israeli government--the 2015 assault of an Ethiopian-born Israeli soldier on the street of Holon, south of Tel Aviv. Under a heading, "Cops beat Ethiopian IDF Soldier in Alleged Racist Attack," *The Times of Israel* reported that the soldier, Damas Pakada, became the target of unprovoked attack by two policemen despite wearing an army uniform. While riding his bicycle, he passed by the two policemen and greeted them with a routine gesture of friendship, but they reacted angrily to him, the soldier claimed, and physically attacked him just because of his race. "I feel terrible, and humiliated. This is a disgrace to the State of Israel," Pakadaretorted. "It's because of [my] skin color," he griped (Lotan, 2015). The international outcry over this incident was so sharp that the Israeli government was forced to engage in "damage control," announcing immediately the suspension of the two racist cops from their job and conducted a full investigation afterwards, the result of which was never publicized.

Since then, there have been several incidents that have electrified the Beta Israel community to engage in organized political activism. As they experience intermittently some startling forms of racial discrimination, which have exposed further the Israeli society's racial/ethnic divide in its worst if not in its abominable manifestations, the community is using the tactics that African Americans once used to fight racism and discrimination in the United States---protests and demonstrations. In one of the most recent shooting incidents, the community rioted complaining that, "...the police shoot its members too readily for racist reasons; this was not the first incident of its kind. Similar events indicate racist motives, leading to protests, some of them violent," as reported by Adnan Abu Amer, a Palestinian academic in an opinion section of *Middle East Monitor*(July 8, 2019, 1). Underscoring this very statement, he describes the protest of the Ethiopian Jews throughout Israel following the shooting death of a young Ethiopian Jew in

Haifa in June 2019 by a police officer, who suspected him of throwing stones at him, this way:"The Ethiopian Jews were promised that they would enter a land of prosperity and happiness when they migrated, but for them it has become a land of persecution, death and funerals. Israeli society doesn't afford them any legitimacy as Jews; it actually perceives them as criminals and violent individuals" (Amer, 2019).

These and other types of incidents are happening more too often for the Ethiopian community in Israel so much that they are getting more organized to fight back thorough protests and demonstrations against discrimination and racism while putting more pressure on the government using their political capital, such as voting during elections in mass, a subject we will examine later in its proper context.

From the foregoing discussion, the theoretical relevance of the race/ethnic disadvantage model of assimilation to the practical racial and social issues facing the Ethiopian Jews in Israel is very much evident. The racial dilemma confronting the Ethiopian Jews there has been as real as what the model predicts would happen, when race is factored in the assimilation process. At the same time, this is not to conclude that it is the only model that can explain the realities of Ethiopian existence in the Middle Eastern country today. Stated differently, this model does not necessarily have an absolute monopoly on the explanatory power of the theory and the concepts associated with the assimilation issues characterizing the state of the Ethiopian Jews in Israel. As such, the segmented assimilation model must also be tested against all the facts pertinent to the Beta Israel to offer a more balanced interpretation of the assimilation thesis central to the current investigation.

The Beta Israel through the Prism of the Segmented Assimilation Model

As pointed out in the earlier section of this paper, the *segmented assimilation model* theorizes that the process of assimilation leads immigrants to taking divergent pathways and integrating at different levels of upward or downward mobility in the their socio-economic rankings, while submerging themselves eventually into a variety of segments of the society of their host country. In sum, this framework of analysis explains assimilation in the context of multiple factors---racial, cultural, structural, spatial, economic, human, financial, and educational---that determine the

immigrants' divergent pathways to mobility as well as the ability to join the ranks of different socio-economic groups in society. Given this premise, the question that follows is that, have the Ethiopian Jews progressed in Israel during the last three decades validating the relevance of this model to their ongoing assimilation struggles? We now turn to answering this question.

While much of the news about the Beta Israel in their adopted country has been downbeat for the most part, however, there has been some shining spots that might serve the community as a spring board from which to reach higher grounds for their advancement in the future in all aspects of life in Israel. In an article titled, "Ethiopian Jews in Israel still await the Promised Land," Michael Blum of *The Daily Telegraph*, a national British daily newspaper, writes, "But there are some success stories," citing them as follows:

In 2008, the Israeli parliament passed legislation making it mandatory for schools to teach the traditions of Ethiopian Jews. And for the first time, the state this year financed the Jerusalem celebrations of Sigd. 'We are at the beginning of a path that will lead us towards full integration into Israeli society,' said Shlomo Mola, a member of parliament of Ethiopian origin. The Sigd celebration brought together a large sample of the Beta Israel community - youths sporting scarves in the Ethiopian colors, women clad in traditional white outfits and Israeli soldiers chatting in Amharic, Ethiopia's main official language. 'We want to present a different image of our community, which has produced doctors, scientists and deputies,' said Mola, one of only three Israelis of Ethiopian origin to have won election to parliament. Nigist Mengesha, who heads the Ethiopian National Project community group, admits it is not easy to merge into Israeli society while keeping Ethiopian traditions. 'But after 25 years, it's time we should be [an] integral part of the state of Israel' (Blum, 2019)

While the above listed social reforms are a good beginning, more is needed to overcome the issues that affect the Beta Israel as a black minority in a racialized Jewish state. Nonetheless, the future might be brighter than many of us may believe. Some demographic data seems to suggest that a few positive signs of progress have been realized already within the Ethiopian Jewish community, especially in education and the workforce, although

miniscule compared to the data Vis a Visthe general Israeli population. For example, the percentage of employed Ethiopians increased from 50 to 72 percent between 2003 and 2015. The percentage of women in the workforce grew from 35 percent to 65 percent in a decade. "Today, 90 percent of Ethiopian Jews have a high-school education, similar to the 93 percent of the overall Jewish population," according to the demographics compiled by the *Jewish Virtual Library*, a project of AICE (the American Israeli Cooperative Enterprise).

Among the few milestones that the AICE cites as having a positive impact on the life of the Ethiopian community in Israel are as follows:

In 1999, Ethiopian youth joined the Israeli Scouts and the first Ethiopian Jew became a doctor. In 2012, Israel appointed its first Ethiopian Jewish ambassador. In 2013, an Ethiopian-Israeli won the Miss Israel Pageant. In 2016, Lt. Col. Avi Yitzhak became the first Ethiopian Israeli to graduate from the IDF's Brigade Commander Course. He was also the first Ethiopian Israeli to ever serve as a combat doctor and is a graduate of Ben-Gurion University's medical program. Yitzhak immigrated to Israel at age 19 in 1991, and prior to entering the Brigade Commander course he led the Combat Medical Branch of the IDF Medical Corps. In another first, Yitzhak became the first Ethiopian Israeli to attain the rank of Colonel in the IDF in November 2016. In 2016, the Israeli Bar Association announced that for the first time in history the Israeli Judicial Committee had selected two Ethiopian women, Adenko Sabhat Haimovich and Esther Tapeta Gradi, to serve as judges. Haimowitz will serve on the Central District Magistrate's Court and Gardi was appointed to serve on the Haifa District Traffic Court. In 2017, an Ethiopian-Israeli IDF officer, Major Yaros Shigot, lit the torch at Israel's national Independence Day ceremony. Seventeen-year-old Ethiopian-Israeli Eden Alene won the 2018 Edition of Israel's "X Factor" singing contest television show in January 2018. In November 2018, Israel's first male Ethiopian judge, Bialin Elazar, was appointed to Jerusalem Magistrate's Court. In December 2018, the Israeli Air Force's first Ethiopian pilot completed his training. The International Center for the Study of Ethiopian Jewry at Ono Academic College launched a Chair for Research of Ethiopian Jewry, the first such academic position in the country and likely the world (2019, 1)

In each area of progress cited in the foregoing excerpted data, it is apparent that the cause of Ethiopian community is not totally lost in Israel after all. Although too little and very limited in scope, the progress being made speaks to the fact that better days are ahead for the Ethiopians there. As they become more integrated into the workforce through better education and move on up in the socio-economic pecking order, their presence will be felt in the course of time, and their assimilation will change the character of the Israeli society eventually. Unfortunately, this will take time, and the journey may have its ups and downs until the desired outcome is realized.

The few milestones, gained by the Ethiopian Jews in some socio-economic and political spheres, as shown by the AICE report, are surely evidence of the multiple factors--racial, cultural, structural, spatial, economic, human, financial, and educational--that the *segmented assimilation theory* premises as a way to gauge immigrants' divergent pathways to social mobility in the country of their destination. Although the Ethiopian Jewish community still faces formidable challenges in its quest for unfettered assimilation into the mainstream Israeli society, the few successes of advancement reported by the AICE comes a long way. While the time to achieve full integration may be decades away, the rate of success that the Beta Israel will achieve depends on the amount support they receive from the government to overcome institutional and societal barriers that they face as a black minority. Indeed, success will come as more opportunities in education and other social services become available to them.

For the most part, the Beta Israel's current assimilation issues have been primarily assessed critically through the parameters of race and cultural idiosyncrasies, and this has been done rightly so. In this regard, much of what has been learned in this investigation about the Beta Israeli has coincided with the theoretical insight provided by the *race/ethnic disadvantage model* of assimilation. However, as this model alone could not have explained the many facets of the Beta Israel experience of the last three decades there and, particularly, the very small progress that the community has made during the most recent years, the *segmented assimilation model* has proven to be just as useful to this study as the *race/ethnic disadvantage model*. Predicting the likelihood of different immigrant groups assimilating into different segments of a host society, the *segmented assimilation theory*

seems to provide the empirical basis of the Beta Israel's upward mobility in some sectors of the Israeli socio-economic configuration. Evidence of this is exhibited in the divergent pathways that some members of the Ethiopian Jewish community are taking to join the ranks of the various socio-economic groups in Israel today, while proving the fact that social mobility is within their reach and thus attainable.

From a practical standpoint, though, the case of the Beta Israel in assimilation studies must be treated on its own merit, setting it apart from those of other immigrants elsewhere, especially where race is the overriding focus of analysis. Simply put, the uniqueness of the Beta Israel's history, including the nature and process of their resettlement, makes their case incomparable with that of other immigrants. Some factors can be cited to account for this exceptionality. First, unlike other immigrants, whose relocation may be a function of economic, political and social forces exerting pressure on their existence in their own country of origin, or whose resettlement in other countries may be the result of a legally approved family reunion, or whose group or individual emigration to other countries may be the consequences of a forced relocation due to man-made or natural disasters, the mass relocation of the Ethiopian Jews to Israel, on the other hand, was driven by a unique set of circumstances that has its own genesis and justifications. While social and economic factors may have played a significant role, the Ethiopian Jews were airlifted to Israel primarily because the *Law of Return* gave them the right to return to the land of Israel that their ancestors supposedly had left behind centuries ago. In this regard, the government of the country of their destination (Israel) managed and sponsored their mass exodus from the country of their origin (Ethiopia) unlike other immigrants of any kind. Second, the Beta Israel, unlike other group migrations to host countries, are the only black immigrant community in peacetime who have relocated en masse based on historical ties. These two reasons alone make them unique in the overall scheme of things.

POSSIBLE IMPACT OF THE ETHIOPIAN JEWS ON THE FUTURE OF ISRAEL

What the future holds for the Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel might be difficult for many to gauge with great certainty at this time; however, there are already indications that the prospect is much brighter for them than what many of us might think otherwise. Yet, more

than anything else, the time ahead will lie on the extent to which they have access to educational opportunities, the only proven vehicle for advancement in any society today. A stronger community, coupled with social programs geared toward addressing the needs of the youth, will also be needed to rise above the familiar stigma that a black minority community often draws from the general public, owing to the prevalence of poverty, crime, and abuse of drugs and alcohol in their midst. While these problems still plague the Ethiopian community in Israel, particularly those among the youth and the unemployed, a stronger community organization, with leaders committed to addressing the various social issues affecting the younger generation, could help overcome such problems gradually. This becomes even more compelling when considering that almost 75 percent of Ethiopian Jewish families in Israel live below the poverty line, which is an astronomical figure.

Albeit the formidable challenges facing the Ethiopian Jews there, this writer argues that the Beta Israel, as a racial minority, still have enormous potential of becoming a force to be reckoned with in their adopted country. Their cohesive community, strong traditions of kinship, and ingenuity for educational excellence all are great resources that are well etched in the Ethiopian Israeli mindset. In fact, the community is making itself felt in some socio-cultural trajectories that have enriched already the multicultural composition of the Israeli society. For example, the Beta Israel have brought with them their distinctive Ethiopian traditions and cultural endowments to a county inhabited overwhelmingly by people of European heritage. In large part, this is visibly displayed in the vibrant Ethiopian sub-culture found today in some major cities of Israel, where the Ethiopian Jewish community is heavily concentrated. Cases in point: Amharic, the official Ethiopian language is widely spoken in Israel; restaurants and shops catering to the Ethiopian community are plentiful; and Ethiopian music and cultural festivities have become the mainstay of the Israeli multicultural society, just to name a few. Whether this exceptionality would translate into an asset or liability for Ethiopian Jews in their assimilation efforts remains to be seen; however, there is a profound optimism among observers---this writer included---that the former rather than latter would be the most likely culmination.

Furthermore, the Ethiopian Jews are already exerting considerable influence in the political arena, as they are organized as a voting bloc and participate actively in the election process either by fielding candidates of their own for political office, or supporting those who champion the cause of their community; for example, two of the current 120 members of the Israeli Knesset (Israeli parliament) are Ethiopian Jews. A case in point also is that in the Israeli parliamentary elections of 2019, it was discovered that the Likud Party of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu lost a substantial number of the votes cast by the Ethiopian Israelis, who traditionally had supported the party in large numbers in previous elections. The Ethiopian support of the Likud Party prior to 2019, according to Lahav Horkov of *The Jerusalem Post*, stemmed "...in part because it is relatively conservative, and because Likud prime ministers launched the operations to bring Ethiopian Jewry to Israel (September 19, 2019). Subsequent to losing the Ethiopian vote, Prime Minister Netanyahu was deprived of winning the majority in the Knesset, thereby forcing him to ask the rival Blue and White party to form a coalition government because his party was unable to do so on its own. Ethiopian Israelis apparently vented their frustration on the Likud Party over the shooting of one of their own by police. "...in the five months between the April election and this week, major protests broke out among Ethiopian-Israelis after Solomon Tekah, a young man from the community, was shot and killed by an off-duty police officer who felt threatened by him," reported Horkov. (2019,1). The community believed police brutality based on race was unchecked in that country and that the government was to blame for allowing it to happen not only once but many times against their community.

It is against this backdrop that the Ethiopians have found the best way to fight for their civil rights: running for parliament seats in the Knesset and impacting positively their community through legislative reforms, along with protests and demonstrations. The quote from part of the excerpt below from a member of the Knesset, who is of Ethiopian ancestry, reinforces both the triumphs and ordeals that the community has experienced:

On the day that 38-year-old Gadi Yevarkan took the oath of office in the Israeli Knesset, he welcomed his mother to the ceremony in the parliament building by kneeling down in front of her and kissing her feet. It was a rare public

display of a traditional Ethiopian gesture of respect. Yevarkan says the first issue that comes up with Ethiopian voters these days is a difficult one: racial profiling by Israel's police. This is a well-known problem in Israel, he says, and he sees his job in the Knesset as passing legislation to stop it (Bell, October 14, 2019).

Another Ethiopian Jew, Tamano-Shata, who is also an elected member of the Knesset, had this to say:

There is profiling against Ethiopians. We are the only black[s] in this country, and it has put us in a very bad situation, that our children feel that they suffer violence behavior from police.

Like most Ethiopians in Israel, Tamano-Shata says she grew up in a family that always voted for Likud, the right-wing party of Prime Minister Netanyahu. But both she and Yevarkan joined the centrist Blue and White party (Bell, 2019).

Likewise, Shlomo Mula, an Ethiopian-Israeli, who served in the Knesset as a Kadima party member between 2008 and 2013, was quoted as saying,

I want to help people who are earning minimum wage and address the fact that there are simply not enough social workers to help the community. We also need to address the looming food shortages. I have already led a discussion on this issue in the Knesset. We cannot let the price of basic food staples such as bread, rice and milk rise so high (Kifle, 2008)

Mula, who made the Aliyah in 1984, had a much larger goal than just tackling the social issues affecting his community. He wished to advance the grandeur of his Ethiopian heritage, affirming that, "I want to create a museum to showcase Ethiopian Jewry's rich history and culture." He further stated that, "We need to have such a center to instill pride in our people and teach Israelis about our past" (Kifle, 2008).

The cases of Ethiopian activism in the Israeli society, including the fight for justice in the Knesset through their representatives, are likely to intensify even more as the new generation of the Beta Israel becomes armed with better education, as well as higher aspirations in life. With increasing integration into the workforce and assimilating into the different segments of the Israeli society, the Ethiopian Jews potential for positively impacting their adopted country in many facets of the Israeli society may rise precipitously in the years to come. In the view

of this writer, one of their greatest potential impacts may become even more manifest in the area of Israeli foreign relations, as this pertains to the Horn of Africa and Ethiopia particularly and continent-wide in general. What possible influence would they be able to exert on Israeli's relations with African countries? This will be explored next.

Ethiopian Jews as Israel's "Human Bridge" to Africa

The role that Ethiopian Israelis will play in the future in the Jewish state's relations with Ethiopia, and by extension with the rest of Africa, is probably best illuminated in the following quotation, which is excerpted from *The Jerusalem Post*. Reporting on the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's welcome speech for the visiting Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali in October 2019, the *Post* quotes Netanyahu as saying that, "...the 150,000 Jews of Ethiopian descent in Israel are a 'living bridge' between the two countries {while} pledging to do what he can to encourage Israeli investment in Ethiopia" (Phillips, 2019).

The warm relationship that exists between Israel and Ethiopia today has been in the making since the relocation of thousands of Ethiopians to the Jewish state. So, the visit by the Ethiopian Prime Minister was only the precursor to similar visits expected by officials of both countries to each other's capital, as they congeal their bilateral relations with a focus on many fronts, including the common challenges that extend beyond their national borders; political, cultural, religious and economic interests that lead to mutual benefits; and interstate engagement in regional and/or global hotspots.

Ethiopian Israelis are expected to benefit from and play a significant part in some of the cooperative efforts envisioned for Ethiopia and Israel. These will include agriculture, water, irrigation, health, science and technology, and the economy, as well as cyber security, telecommunication, space science and technology, reported *The Jewish News Syndicate*. In his speech, Prime Minister Netanyahu further stressed that,

Our ancient peoples have historic ties, but it's a special bond because it is also strengthened by a human bridge of 150,000 Israelis of Ethiopian descent who bring the culture of Ethiopia, the pride of Ethiopia, to Israel, just as they maintain the culture of the Jewish people and the pride of the Jewish people in Ethiopia....We know that

the first prerequisite of any government, of any society, is security. We are both being challenged. We're being challenged by radical Islamic terrorists. They not only challenge us, they challenge the world. We believe that we can offer some experience, some shared experience that we have garnered because of our unfortunate need to defend ourselves, (Phillips, 2019, 1).

Given the burgeoning relationship between Israel and Ethiopia, therefore, the prospect of the Beta Israel helping shape Israel's foreign relations toward the Horn of Africa and throughout the continent in the future could be significant. Already, Ethiopian Israelis have made their mark on Israeli-Ethiopian relations in one particular case in point: Israel sent a team of fire fighters to Ethiopia in April 2019 to help extinguish the large fires raging in the Simien Mountains, the country's main tourist attractions that were facing blazes on and off for several weeks. In response to Ethiopia's request for help, Israel sent a delegation that consisted of "...11 firefighters and rescue officials, led by Zion Shenkar, who was born in Ethiopia and was the Israel Defense Force's first-ever battalion commander from the Ethiopian community" (Toi Staff, "Israel Sebds team to Help battle Ethiopian Mountain Blaze (Lotan, 2019). This case alone is an indication of what is likely to happen in the future, as the Beta Israel become more integrated into most of the Israeli society. In the long term, Ethiopia is expected to benefit from Israel in many crucial areas of interstate relations, including tourism and investment. The Beta Israel are viewed by their fellow Ethiopians in their country of origin as future investors and frequent visitors, which would be a bonanza for the tourism industry in the Horn of Africa country.

In review, the Israeli-Ethiopian bilateral friendship has had a long history, according to Kassim She him, adding that Israeli-Ethiopian relations have endured for decades despite regime changes in Ethiopia. She him also observes that,

Israeli-Ethiopian relations are in some ways unique in Africa. One notable aspect is the Ethiopian Jewish community, commonly known as the Falasha, who believe their roots can be traced to Jews at the court of King Solomon to his son by Queen of Sheba, Menelik ((Shehim, 1988, 25).

Since its establishment as a state in 1948, Israel had enjoyed a good relationship not only with

Ethiopia but also with several sub-Saharan African countries, particularly between 1955-1967, when such countries, fresh from independence, pursued Israel's military and economic aid, as well as technological knowhow; Israel, in return, sought African diplomatic support to shore up its strategic interest in its ongoing conflict at that time with Egypt and other hostile Arab neighbors. All this changed of course following the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, when all African countries that had diplomatic representation in Israel severed ties, including Ethiopia (Bishku, 1994).

However, prior to 1974 during the time of the imperial era in Ethiopia, Israeli advisors trained Ethiopian military units on behest of Emperor Haile Selassie, the last Ethiopian monarch who was overthrown in 1974 from his throne. In the early 1960s, for example, Israel started helping the Ethiopian government in its campaigns against the Eritrean Liberation Front, which was viewed as a creation of Arab countries to destabilize Ethiopia's sovereignty. So, in that respect, Ethiopia's and Israel's strategic interests in the Red Sea, or even more so in the Horn of Africa from the geopolitical standpoint, were almost in sync, although that would change after the 1973 Arab-Israeli War.

Even after Ethiopia broke diplomatic relations with Israel in 1973, which came about due to pressure exerted by north African Arab states that were members of the Organization of African Union (OAU), the predecessor of today's African Union (AU), Israeli military aid continued after the Derg military junta, led by Colonel Mengistu Hailemariam who came to power in 1974, and included spare parts and ammunition for U.S.-made weapons and jet fighters. Israel still maintained a small group of military advisers in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital, and has always continued to have an unpublicized, clandestine military cooperation throughout the decades, even at the height of Arab-African solidarity against Israel with respect to the Palestinian issue. The two countries restored their formal diplomatic relations in 1989. It was in that same year that a secret agreement between Mengistu and Israel was reportedly made to allow the remaining Beta Israel community in Ethiopia to immigrate to Israel in exchange for increased military assistance (Bishku, 1994, 39-56).

While Ethiopia's strategic importance to Israel has been a well-known fact, however, helping Israel build better relations with other African

countries is one that will remain to be seen; however, there are already signs that many African countries are following the footsteps of Ethiopia's long-established relations with Israel to cement their own relationship with the Jewish state. Writing an opinion piece, titled, "Ethiopia and Israel's Pivot to Africa" in the *International Policy Digest*, Yacqub Ismael observes

Israel's deepening ties with Ethiopia is part of its strategy throughout Africa. In 2016, Prime Minister Netanyahu announced a new Africa policy called "Return to Africa" to expand its ties with states like Ethiopia and to explore new ones. As a result, Netanyahu paid several state visits to countries in East Africa, while exploring new ones in West Africa (Ismael, 2019)

Although Israel has gradually won diplomatic recognition by establishing friendly relations with 37 of 54 African countries, 10 of which having established full-fledged diplomatic ties, the historical bonds it has had for centuries with Ethiopia more than any other state in the continent makes Israeli-Ethiopian relationship not only special but also all too important. Besides, Ethiopia anchors the continent by the virtue of being the headquarters of the AU. Israeli's proximity to the Red Sea and Ethiopia's location near the vital water way also provide both countries with mutual strategic interest particularly in the security arena. After all, the Horn of Africa is a geopolitical battleground for many global powers, including the U.S., China, Russia, Egypt, Turkey, and Iran, and Arab states of the Persian Gulf; Israel's security interest is therefore directly tied to the geo-politics of the Horn of Africa, where Ethiopia is regarded as a hegemon power.

However, Israel's growing diplomatic relations with African countries are already infuriating its Middle Eastern foes. In an opinion piece, titled "Arabs Should Thwart Israel's Ambitions in Africa," As 'ad Abdul Rahman forewarns vehemently that,

The change in Israel's international standing in recent years, away from any progress in the 'peace process' (with the Palestinians and other Arabs), has been absorbed in African capitals. One must admit that since Netanyahu took office in 2009, Israel has managed to penetrate Africa and restore diplomatic relations with several countries. This carefully planned drive will most probably transfer Israeli relations in Africa to a comprehensive framework, and then the possible main loser will only be the Palestinian

cause as it will lose the most important and heaviest voting bloc shielding it, which has always been represented by African countries. With the 'early spring' arrival of Israel into Africa, will the Arab League states meet the challenge or enter an 'autumn' there? The Arabs must thwart these ambitions of Tel Aviv. It is time to call for an Arab or even Islamic tangible confrontation against Israeli penetration in Africa before it is too late (Rahman, 2019)

Exploring the Israel-Arab rivalry for sphere of influence in Africa would be a great research project; however, it would be beyond the scope of this investigation. Even so, the Horn of Africa is particularly of immense strategic interest for Israel so much that it has increased its efforts to include other East African countries in her sphere of influence with the aim of countering the influence that Arab countries have had in Africa for decades; this was clearly confirmed in Prime Minister Netanyahu's 2026 visits to Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda. During the past several decades, the Horn of Africa has drawn numerous external powers due to the strategic importance of the region. At the same time, Israel's influence in the region was too limited if not non-existent due to the Palestine issue; however, this has changed dramatically in more recent years. As both superpower rivalry and Middle Eastern aspiring powers are making significant inroads into the Horn of Africa, Israel's interest in the region has considerably heightened, as well. Israel has even become a mediator of sorts in the Ethno-Egyptian crisis over the new Ethiopian hydroelectric dam being built on the Blue Nile, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), at a cost of \$4.8 billion, to meet Ethiopia's growing electricity demands. Although Egypt has denied the report that it sought Israeli assistance in resolving the crisis, observers think otherwise. Egypt is gravely concerned because it relies almost exclusively on the Nile for farming and drinking water and fears the dam would significantly diminish its share of the river's water. Over the last several years, Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt had been engaged in seesaw negotiating sessions over the amount of water to be stored and released, as well as the timing of the dam's full operation; all negotiations have failed so far. Israel's interference in the region, coupled with her presumed favor of Ethiopia as a security partner, came in full view when media reports revealed, though denied by the Israelis, "...that Israeli defensive systems are in place to

protect the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).....amid escalating crisis between Egypt and Ethiopia over the Nile waters” (Egypt Independent, 2019). Accessed 11/13/2019 [https:// www.egypt-independent. com/ israel-reacts-to-reports-that-its-defense-systems-will-protect-the-gerd/](https://www.egypt-independent.com/israel-reacts-to-reports-that-its-defense-systems-will-protect-the-gerd/)

So, taken as a whole, the future of Ethiopian Jews in Israel will be one of activism on the home front for justice and civil rights through protests and demonstrations, while using the electoral process to push for legislation favorable to their cause through their elected representatives in the Knesset. Simultaneously, their activism on the external front might entail championing the cause of Ethiopia, particularly, and the Horn of Africa and beyond in the Israeli foreign policy-making process. This would be in addition to advancing the strategic interest of their adopted country and reinforcing the existing warm relations between Ethiopia and Israel while helping coalesce their strategic priorities in the Horn of Africa, likewise.

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to investigate the state of Ethiopian Jews in Israel since their relocation from Ethiopia more than three decades ago. The study, while not exhaustive, uncovered several findings. First it revealed that racial, religious and cultural factors were barriers to a seamless assimilation of the Beta Israel into the mainstream Israeli society. At the same time, the study discovered areas where Ethiopian Israelis would positively impact and become a force in the Jewish state by helping shape Israel's foreign relations with Ethiopia, a hegemonic state in the Horn of Africa and one that plays a dominant role in interstate relations throughout the continent. Evidence also suggested that the future of the Beta Israel, while facing epic racial issues at home, would be one of activism to bring justice to their cause domestically while also serving as a “human bridge” between Ethiopia and Israel, and between Israel and other African countries. In terms of theory, few sophisticated explanations have been developed thus far to better understand the overall theme of immigrants' assimilation process into receiving countries. In this connection, the theories of assimilation, with a focus on the Beta Israel, were tested and their utility validated. So, all these findings are significant for practice, policy and further research.

In practice, the study has shown that in a multiethnic society where a parliamentary

system of governance is in place, as is the case with Israel, a minority immigrant community capable of mobilizing its members for a political action to advance the community's cause through the electoral process can be effective in bringing desired social changes. However, this is more likely to happen in a multi-party, parliamentary system in which each party gains representation in a legislative body in proportion to the results received by each party. Yet, in comparison, this would be less likely to occur in a single-member district system of representation in which only the candidate receiving the most votes (plurality vote) represents that district; this system of representation is in effect a “winner-take-all” electoral procedure. In this regard, the Beta Israel could use the proportional system to their advantage through their political activism, although they don't necessarily have an exclusive party of their own currently; however, with their growing population count, although still miniscule at present, it is possible they may have such a party in the future, or become a party in coalition with other similar parties based on an ideological compatibility. Currently, they switch parties based on the party's support of their cause for justice and equality, as they have done already from Likud Party to the Blue and White Party.

In terms of policy, the study validates that the Israeli government's treatment of the Ethiopian Jewish community has progressively convalesced, but a lot is still needed to assist them in making the transition from an agrarian-based living in Ethiopia to an industrialized society in Israel, especially for those who migrated during their advanced age, who make up 59% of the Beta Israel population currently. Secondly, the first generation of Ethiopian Israelis, comprising 14% of the youth, should have access to more educational opportunities and skills training so that the current high unemployment rate of Israeli-borne Ethiopian youth will be significantly reduced. This in turn will deter protests and demonstrations that normally emanate from frustrations, fed by feelings of powerlessness and of gloomy future. Moreover, the Israeli government must immediately address this protracted crisis: police brutality against Ethiopian Israelis based on their race and national origin should unconditionally cease while exposing the police and other law enforcement personnel to cultural sensitivity trainings. This will help the police see how unconscious biases can distort decision-

making, and they learn what they can do to avoid making snap judgments about them. Cultural sensitivity training, which is a common practice in the U.S., could provide the Israeli police a set of skills that enables them to learn about the culture and sensitivities of the Ethiopian Jewish community, thereby becoming better able to serve them when needed.

Finally, this investigation heralds the view that a comprehensive study of the Beta Israel in all aspects of their life experience would be essential to have a more accurate picture of the realities reflecting the state of their assimilation into the mainstream of the Israeli society. While 30 years of life in Israel for many Ethiopian Israelis may not provide a good measure of their integrated life as an immigrant community, future research based on the first generation of this community should.

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