

The Refuseniks of Addis Ababa

BERNARD DICHEK visits Ethiopia to meet the African Jews that Israel doesn't want



A DECADE HAS PASSED since Anagaw Haile, a farmer living in the Gondar region of Ethiopia, sold his land, goats and household possessions in preparation for his move to Israel.

Together with his wife, seven children and grandchildren, he was planning to join four brothers who had made aliya several years earlier. Haile and his family traveled for two days by bus and arrived at the Israeli Embassy in Addis Ababa where, after filling out an aliya application form, he was told by Israeli Embassy officials that he would have to wait.

Ten years later, Haile is still waiting. Together with several thousand other Ethiopian Jews waiting in Addis Ababa, who have come to be known as the Falash Mura, he and his family have been denied permission by the Israeli government to join their families in Israel, even though his brothers are already there. They have been in limbo and in misery ever since. Haile, now 80 and in poor health, continues to live in a ramshackle hut that he thought would be just temporary housing.

Two of his children live nearby. Five of them have already emigrated to Israel.

"We expected to join them soon after they left," laments Haile's youngest son, Tesfahun, 28, one hot spring morning in Addis Ababa, standing outside a large canvas tent that serves as a synagogue for the stranded Jews. "We didn't realize that our family would be split in half and maybe never see each other again."

The synagogue is located on a small street about 200 meters away from the embassy. Inside, about 250 congregants are chanting morning prayers in a mixture of Hebrew and Amharic. The men sit separately from the women, who cover themselves with white cotton shawls. They conclude with a moving

version of Am Yisrael Chai, a song that has been a Zionist rallying cry for generations.

The Haile family is not the only one yearning to be reunited. A visitor asks the crowd who among them wants to go to Israel. One by one the congregants rise and exclaim in Amharic: "*Holachin*" – "All of us." Many hold up photographs of family members whom they haven't seen in years.

"These are my grandchildren," says one man displaying a snapshot of several smiling 20-somethings on the beach in Ashdod. A woman holds a photo of her brother's wedding ceremony in Netanya. "These are my boys," says another woman, tearfully clutching a photo of two young men in IDF uniforms.

The cheerfulness of the family pictures contrasts sharply with the hellish accounts of their own living conditions. "When the people of Israel left Egypt they had everything they needed," says one elderly woman. "But we

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don't have enough to eat and no way to earn a living." A man laments that his wife died in childbirth because they didn't have enough money to pay for a hospital. "My body may be alive, but inside I am dead," says another woman, trying to convey the pain of being separated from her children.

Rejected

Why have these people been rejected by the Israeli government? Why were some of their brothers, sisters, parents and children

allowed to immigrate? And how is it possible that the Israeli government has turned such a cold shoulder to their plight?

The answer goes back to a decision made by the government led by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in 2003. Until then, varying criteria were used to determine who was eligible for aliya. The 2003 government directive granted aliya status only to those who "are Jewish according to *halakha*" – Orthodox Jewish law. According to *halakha*, a Jew is someone with a Jewish mother, or has converted according to Orthodox procedure. Consequently, after the Ministry of Interior began implementing the new decision in April of 2004, only those Ethiopians who could show that their mothers and grandmothers were listed as Jewish in a 1999 survey qualified for aliya.

Haile, whose father and three grandparents were Jewish, but whose mother was not, did not meet the criteria. Immigration officials were not moved by the fact that he had sold all his property before the new rule was enforced and that he had no way back, nor by his desire to be reunited with his four



WEARING THIN: Some of the Jews in Ethiopia have been waiting in temporary accommodation for ten years to come to Israel (BERNARD DICHEK)

brothers who had reached Israel prior to the change in policy.

The government decision on Ethiopian aliya contradicts the Law of Return, a founding principle of the Jewish state, which grants citizenship to anyone with a single Jewish grandparent. The decision is considered by many to be discriminatory. The Ethiopians waiting in Addis Ababa follow events in Israel closely and they are painfully aware that there is no similar edict for Jews wishing to immigrate from any other part of the world.

“There is a stigma about us Ethiopian people,” says Endino Abay, 23, whose father and step-brothers emigrated to Israel 10 years ago. “We may be poor but we are Jewish.” Abay, a college student who regularly attends synagogue services, was barred from making aliya because his mother, divorced from his Jewish father, is Christian.

“Russian people get treated differently,” he says, noting that an estimated 300,000 Christians from the former Soviet Union have immigrated to Israel during the past 20 years with just one Jewish grandparent.

Ministry of Interior bureaucrats appear to go out of their way to implement the 2003 directive with particular harshness, often disqualifying Ethiopian Jews who have non-Jewish spouses, even if they themselves are maternally Jewish and therefore automatically

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eligible for Israeli citizenship.

Gebeyhu Negede, 53, an electronics engineer with six children, is better off economically than most of the Falash Mura, living in a comfortable home in the Ethiopian capital. But when it comes to aliya he faces the same frustration. His mother and grandmother were Jewish but his wife is a convert. “She’s become a real fanatic,” Negede jokes about his wife’s religious fervor.

Negede describes growing up in a home where his mother lit Shabbat candles and

where he was forbidden to carry money on the holy day. He did not join the earlier waves of Ethiopian aliya because he was stationed overseas as a major with the Ethiopian army.

Like many of the others, he is perplexed by the attitude of the Israeli Embassy. “They never give any reason. They just tell us to wait,” Negede says.

“While organizations like the Red Cross try to reunite families, the Israeli government keeps them apart,” he adds bitterly.

On the gatepost to the Negede home there is a sculpted Magen David. A large Israeli flag hangs on the living room wall. As Negede’s wife places *injera*, the crepe-like Ethiopian bread on the dinner plates, his children say in unison the *motze*, the traditional Jewish blessing over bread. This family is clearly committed to Judaism and to Israel.

Eager

“What kind of medical labs do they have in Israel?” asks Betlehem, 24, the oldest child and a hospital lab supervisor, who is eager to find out everything she can about the country she hopes to live in.



BERNARD DICHEK

DIVIDED FAMILIES: Jewish women at the makeshift synagogue in Addis Ababa with photographs of relatives now in Israel

Negede ran his first successful business venture selling honey on street corners when he was 11 years old. Today, he runs a chain of TV repair shops and serves as a consultant to large electronics companies. With his skills and enterprising manner, he is confident he will thrive in Israel’s modern economy. But Negede’s attempts to take his family to Israel have been stymied because, as well as a non-Jewish wife, he is also classified that way in Ministry of Interior records.

“He’s listed as a ‘code C,’” explains Negede’s Israeli cousin Avraham Negusie, head of South Wing to Zion, an Israel-based NGO that supports the Ethiopian Jewish community. Negusie pulls a binder onto the desk in his office in Jerusalem that is a copy of the 1999 Ministry of Interior survey. According to the byzantine classification system, the letter E is a code assigned to someone who is considered Jewish through both parents, the letter B via their mother only, and C from their father only.

Negede, it seems, has been incorrectly classified but his attempts to correct the situation have gone unanswered. “There is no system of appeal,” sighs Negusie. “The ministry’s decision is final.”

Negusie, 52, admits it wasn’t always this way. In 1984, Israel brought 8,000 Ethiopian

Jews here, and in Operation Solomon in 1991, another 14,000 were airlifted to Israel. Today, he says, some 130,000 Ethiopian Jews live in Israel. Negusie, who came to Israel in 1984, founded South Wing in 1991 to protest the government’s announced intention to curtail Ethiopian immigration altogether that year.

“They said that all of the Jews were already here. Well, since then we have managed to

He has been incorrectly classified as a non-Jew but he cannot appeal the ministry’s decision

bring another 55,000,” he says with a smile.

But when it comes to advocating on behalf of the Falash Mura, Negusie has run into a brick wall. He explains that the name itself is a misnomer. “The Falash Mura was used historically to denote Ethiopian Jews who no longer kept Jewish practices,” explains Negusie. “But that’s not the criteria used by the Ministry of Interior.”

He says that even on religious grounds it makes no sense. “All Ethiopian Jews who make aliya are required to undergo year-long

classes in Judaism and a conversion process supervised by the Sephardi chief rabbi,” he says.

Negusie emphasizes that regardless of religious considerations, a larger humanitarian issue is at stake – the basic human right of family reunification. “About 85 percent of the Falash Mura have first-degree relatives in Israel,” he says.

Rejected

Negusie disputes the contention that accepting those with first-degree relatives would inundate the country with new immigrants. At the request of *The Jerusalem Report*, Negusie checks the number of people with family ties in Israel whose aliya applications were rejected. In data published here for the first time, he reveals the total numbers involved.

“Of the 459 individuals in Addis Ababa with first-degree relatives in Israel, 177 have either parents or grandparents in Israel, 53 have children here, and 124 have brothers and sisters,” he says. Add to these the immediate family members who would accompany them to Israel, and the total number of potential immigrants is just 1,503.

The numbers for the Falash Mura

STYMIED: (Right) Gebeyhu Negede and a family member in front of his electronics shop (Below) Negede misclassified in an Israeli Ministry of the Interior survey of Ethiopian Jews

community in Gondar are about the same: 550 families with first-degree relatives, comprising about 1,500 aliya hopefuls.

The lives of 3,000 people are at stake. The problem will only increase if the government drags its feet

Altogether, the lives of about 3,000 people are at stake.

“We are asking the government to let all of these people come to Israel and put an end to the matter once and for all,” he says, warning that the numbers will continue to grow. The problem will only increase.

The Israeli authorities see things differently. On November 10, 2010, a decision made by the Netanyahu government renewed the criteria set by the Sharon government in 2003. Those who are Jewish only on their father’s side are routinely disqualified for aliya.

Amos Arbel, the Ministry of Interior official in charge of immigration from Ethiopia, responds that his department receives numerous requests from families with relatives in Ethiopia on a daily basis.

“We try to handle cases in the most considerate and humanitarian way possible, but we are bound by the rules of eligibility decided on by the government,” he says, noting that his department has made exceptions involving about 150 cases during the past 18 months.

Members of the community are wary of increasing public pressure on behalf of the Falash Mura because the government is dragging its feet even when it comes to allowing Ethiopian Jews approved for aliya.

“There are less than 3,000 on that list and they are only allowed to trickle into the country at a rate of about 200 a month,” observes Avraham Negusie.

The current bureaucratic impasse is a far cry from Operation Solomon, when 14,000 people were airlifted to Israel in 48 hours, and holds out little hope for those stranded in Addis Ababa.

“My father lives in a damp room without air and is getting sicker all the time,” says



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1048	Y	AYALEW	ALEBIE	4	1827	FATHER	B
1049	UYE	GERTENTE	BIRHANU	1	3519	UNCLE	B
1050	UYE	TEGEGNE	DERSO	4	1744	BROTHER	B
1051	UYE	FENEYAHUN	GEBERIE	1	1388	BROTHER	B
1052	Y	KASSA	SEBHY	7	2226	BROTHER	B
1053	UYE	SHIBABAW	DEREJE	7	3832	BROTHER	B
1054	Y	AMARE	WORKU	2	5020	AUNT	E
1055	U	ESHETE	GEBEYHU	2	5123	G.MOTHER	E
1056	T	TEKTEKEW	BERU	5	1833	FATHER	C
1057	U	ASIGEDONE	FELEKE	4	65838	SON	C
1058	U	FENTAHUN	ABEREHAM	2	5128	BROTHER	B
1059	U	ASSARE	AYALEW	3	1398	UNCLE	C
1060	U	ENGIDA	HEGASH	1	2836	BROTHER	C
1061	U	TEREFE	KASSAHUN	7	1602	SISTER	C
1062	U	EMERU	MULU	1		UNCLE	C
1063	U	BELETE	ASEFA	1	2985	UNCLE	B
1064	U	BEKONEN	BEKONEN	3	1579	AUNT	E
1065	U	ADIMASU	ADIMASU	9	3658	UNCLE	C
1066	U	FILATIE	FILATIE	4	2094	UNCLE	B

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Mulu Haile, 40, one of Anagaw Haile’s sons. He lives in Rishon Lezion and sends money to help his parents and other family members in Ethiopia from his earnings as a supermarket worker. He also has four children of his own.

Mulu’s children also long to be reunited with their grandparents. “Every Friday when

my friends go to their grandparents for dinner, I feel tears swelling up in my throat,” says Esther, Mulu’s 18-year-old daughter. “Why, I ask, can’t I have dinner with my grandparents? Why can’t I have the kind of special food only my grandmother knows how to make? I haven’t seen her since I was 10 years old.” ●