

activists, army officers, and artists: a small but growing minority among Ethiopian Jews now growing up in Israel. But there is still a long, long way to go, and the entire Jewish world needs to be a partner in this journey.

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*living in Jerusalem. A reporter in Ethiopia during the year of Operation Solomon, he was the last journalist to interview Ethiopian President Mengistu Haile Mariam. Odenheimer was the founding director of the Israel Association for Ethiopian Jews and now serves as their board chair. Odenheimer is a contributing editor at the Jerusalem Report.*

## Meeting Communal Responsibility

*Yuli Tamir*

**T**he Falas Mura are apostate Falasim who refer to themselves as part of the Beta Israel. Movement from one religion to another went in both directions. Falasim adopted Christianity and Christians converted to Judaism. Many of the converts to Christianity were from the better-educated, upper class of Falasa society.

The reasons for the conversion of the Jews of Ethiopia to Christianity vary:

1. 19th-century European missionaries proselytized Jews by erecting schools, providing medical aid, welfare support, and religious experiences.
2. Political pressure was applied to communities with "foreign" beliefs (such as the Jews, Moslems, and Kamantim) during the rule of Emperor Johannes (1869–1889).
3. Because in the 11th century Ethiopian Jews did not have the same land ownership rights as Christians, many converted in order to attain economic and social equality.

The *aliyah* of Ethiopian Jews to Israel, which engendered contacts between the Jewish community in Ethiopia and Israelis, fostered a growing connection with Judaism and the Jewish people and created the demand by the Falas Mura for *aliyah*. Many of the Falas Mura gathered in temporary camps in Addis Ababa and Gondar, where they remain under intolerable conditions.

Approximately 4,000 Falas Mura have made *aliyah* to Israel and have been absorbed as a result of arrangements coordinated by relevant governmental agencies. This *aliyah* suffers many hardships, due in part to family complexity, severe health problems, the problematic unification of families, and the large percentage of single parent families, sick seniors, and orphans who arrive with

older siblings. The Ministry of Absorption, as the organization responsible for finding solutions for the problems of new immigrants, or *olim*, has mobilized to address the specific problems of this *aliyah*. The *olim* have been gathered into five trailer parks around the country, and each site has developed a specific program to deal with the problems of its residents. In addition, *olim* from Quara have begun to arrive and are being absorbed in trailer parks as well as absorption centers.

The primary problem we face today is that of those still waiting in Ethiopia. Thousands of Falas Mura remain in the transit camps in Addis Ababa and Gondar for approval to make *aliyah*. According to reports, conditions in the camps are unbearable and, because of the crowding and hunger, epidemics occur that result in many deaths, particularly of children. These camps impose a great burden that affects, among others, the *olim* that live in Israel who fear for the safety of their families in Ethiopia.

Because the responsibility for bringing *olim* to Israel belongs to the Jewish Agency and the Ministry of Interior, I have requested the Minister of Interior, Mr. Natan Sharansky, to send a special team to the camps to decide, once and for all, who is entitled to *aliyah* and who is not. Those who are determined as eligible should be brought immediately. We will thereby solve the problem of those who are waiting, and bring to an end the intolerable situation of uncertainty in which they find themselves. Such a decision will also ease the concerns of those waiting for relatives to arrive, who will be informed which of their family members will be given permission to make *aliyah*. I know that such a decision is not easy and some people will be hurt by this ruling, if it transpires. And yet any determination, hard as it



may be, is better than the limbo that results from uncertainty.

I know that there are no easy solutions to the Falas Mura problem. I hope that our solution will hurt few, help many, and alleviate this uncertainty.

*Professor Yuli Tamir, of the One Israel party, is Minister for Immigrant Absorption in the Government of Israel. Translated from the Hebrew by Irving M. Fogel.*

## Living Words

*Living Words*, a book of High Holiday Sermons from 5759, is still available: \$17.95 from the *Sh'ma* office, 56 Kearney Rd., Suite B, Needham, MA 02494. Sermons collected from 5760 are currently with a panel of judges, and the favored 18 will be published online in June. Unfortunately, printing costs did not allow for a print publication.

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