

# Ethiopian immigrants in Israel: experience and prospects

Seldom has any community undergone as dramatic, complete and irreversible a change in so short a period as the Jews of Ethiopia . . . As a result, many features of Ethiopian Jewish life remain little understood. Nowhere is this truer than with regard to their immigration and adaptation to Israeli society.

**Steven Kaplan and Hagar Salamon**

The **Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR)**, an independent think-tank, informs and influences policy, opinion and decision-making on issues affecting Jewish life worldwide by conducting and commissioning research, developing and disseminating policy proposals and promoting public debate.

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#### **Acknowledgements**

JPR would like to acknowledge the financial support of the Kennedy Leigh Charitable Trust.

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## Foreword

*Are ye not as the children of the Ethiopians unto Me, O children of Israel? saith the Lord.*  
(Amos IX,7)

The manner in which the old-new nation of Israel practises the biblical Jewish value of *tzedakkah*—social justice—in the contemporary world is the subject of this important and timely report by Steven Kaplan and Hagar Salamon. It introduces a new human rights 'track' within JPR's Israel Programme that signifies a commitment to widen our policy research agenda to include issues concerning the treatment of minority communities.

The dramatic rescue of thousands of Ethiopian Jews from war, famine and oppression and their transportation 'on eagles' wings' (Exodus XIX, 4) by the Israel airforce to a sanctuary in the 'Promised Land' appears to fulfil in our days the promises of the Hebrew prophets, repeated in Jewish prayers over two millennia, about *kibbutz galuyot*—'the ingathering of the exiles' to Zion. 'Operation Moses' in 1984 and 'Operation Solomon' in 1991 were unique events: for the first time in history, black people were taken from Africa not in order to enslave them but to welcome them as full and equal citizens of a democracy. The altruism of the Israeli public was matched by an unusual consensus among Israel's normally bitterly divided political factions: it was agreed that there was a sacred duty to rescue, without reservation or regard to the costs involved, all the Ethiopian Jews, including the sick, the elderly, 'the widow and the orphan'. This principled stand made Jews worldwide feel proud. Many saw in Israel's generosity of spirit a moral indictment of other nations' inaction and hypocrisy when confronted by refugee crises both during and since the Nazi era. The dramatic events in the Horn of Africa also provided Jews with clear evidence to rebut the Soviet-inspired antisemitic canard that Zionism equalled racism. It was a tangible demonstration, in Isaiah's phrase, of Israel's fulfilling the role of *or la'goyim*—'a light unto the nations'—and of Judaism's impulse to practise charity rather than preach it.

But these are not messianic days and the saga of the Ethiopian Jews did not end with the drama of successful rescue. It had to be followed up by the less glamorous task of rehabilitation and resettlement. The challenge of settling newcomers from a rural Third World background in an urban environment in an advanced Western economy now faced the Israeli authorities. There were the practical problems of the social adaptation by penniless, tradition-minded, tribal people to a free-market, consumer-oriented

economy in an individualistic society. Moreover, there was an unpredictable psychological element: the status of the Ethiopian Jewish community was inverted—from that of a pariah group and religious minority (albeit part of the majority in terms of colour and language) in Africa, to that of part of the dominant Jewish majority (albeit, in terms of language and colour, a readily identifiable group) in Israel.

In analyzing the problems of resettling the Ethiopian Jews in Israel, we enter the familiar territory of current political debate in free societies on the contentious area of public policy—welfare, jobs, housing, education—and the limits of interventionist strategies and social engineering by even well-meaning governments. Questions of race, disadvantage and social exclusion bedevil most contemporary Western societies. Integrating large numbers of poor, black immigrants into an affluent society is not a problem unique to Israel. However, because of Israel's Law of Return, the Israeli situation stands in marked contrast to that in West European countries or North America. As Jews, the Ethiopians entered not as refugees or asylum-seekers but with the automatic right to settle in the country and to participate fully in national life as citizens from the day of their arrival.

As this report demonstrates, while legal citizenship confers the rights of membership of the body politic and the duties of participation on those who would seek to become insiders in the nation-state, it does not automatically translate into integration and social equality. Therefore, this case study is of wider interest to those concerned with social policy and race relations. Israel has unparalleled experience in coping with the sudden influx of newcomers and a fine record in the absorption of traumatized refugees and their transformation into productive and patriotic citizens. The state provides an impressive array of special benefits for immigrants including language classes, health coverage, counselling, job training, housing and mortgage loan facilities and a commitment to affirmative action in the military and higher education. Yet, notwithstanding these assets, and the positive start and widespread goodwill displayed towards the Ethiopian Jews, the findings are chastening.

Despite the Israeli determination to deny the significance of race and to emphasize the commonality of religion and Zionist ideology, many of the facts reported here are problems common to the global African diaspora—e.g. above-average rates of single parents, male unemployment and low-wage jobs, and dependence on welfare. Particularly noteworthy is the transmission of this disadvantage to the

youth, who are prone to under-achievement in education and over-representation in special education classes.

These social problems, as well as official indecision on issues such as dispersal and concentration in housing, the unforeseen results of exposure to HIV/AIDS and the unhelpful attitude of the Orthodox rabbinate, have served to increase stereotyping by the general public as well as disaffection and charges of racism on the part of the Ethiopians. In defence of the authorities, it must be said that more pressing political problems, such as the peace process, have claimed Israel's attention. It can also be argued that the 1990s and the swiftly changing, complex society of Israel were not a propitious time and place for this immigration. The egalitarian and austere atmosphere of 1950s Israel, which was dominated by agricultural pioneering, would no doubt have provided a more compatible environment for the Ethiopians, in particular adults with experience of dry-land farming.

The story of the Ethiopian Jews in Israel is unfinished but the current realities have to be faced. This report shows that the health of Israeli society and the pursuit of social justice require the authorities to pay far more attention to social policy and minority questions in the future. They

will have to develop quantitative and qualitative indicators for comparative analysis of social development among the various *edot*—ethnic communities. As the report suggests, in order to accomplish this result, the Israeli authorities will have to provide for the collection and availability of relevant demographic and socio-economic data on minorities and for ethnic monitoring and make them available for public scrutiny.

Perplexing dilemmas and fundamental policy questions which remain unanswered by Israel's elites are relevant to, but beyond the scope of, this report and the Ethiopian experience. Does the concept of citizenship confer social as well as political rights and are these rights conferred on individuals or the group? Does common citizenship imply an acculturation process? Are there limits to differences that cannot be contained within the boundaries of a liberal democracy? How far should, and could, a new nation like Israel go in meeting the demands for cultural recognition and accommodation by the various *edot*? These questions go to the heart of the contemporary debate on social justice and the treatment of minorities in today's world. Clearly, Israel is not the only country which confronts these challenges.

**Professor Barry Kosmin**  
*Director of Research, JPR*

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## Glossary of Hebrew and Amharic words

<i>aliyah</i>	immigration to Israel
<i>bagrut</i>	matriculation exams
<i>Halakha</i>	Jewish rabbinic law
<i>Knesset</i>	Israeli parliament
<i>karavanim</i>	mobile homes
<i>ma'abarot</i>	tent camps
<i>mechina</i>	college preparatory course
<i>qessim/qessotch</i>	Ethiopian Jews' religious leaders
<i>Sigd</i>	a pilgrimage holiday which commemorates the Biblical return from exile
<i>te'ef</i>	traditional iron-rich grain
<i>zar</i>	spirit possession

## Summary

In 1977 all but approximately 100 Beta Israel (Falasha) lived in Ethiopia. Today, as a result of immigration and natural growth, close to 65,000 Ethiopians live in Israel and only a handful remain in Africa.

Demographically, the Ethiopian community is comparatively young: over 50 per cent are aged eighteen or under. The community also contains a high percentage of both one-parent families (27 per cent) and large households with six or more members.

Attempts have been made to avoid settling too many Ethiopians in deprived areas. Yet a comparatively large number of Ethiopians live in communities with social and economic problems and this affects their educational opportunities. Providing educational frameworks for the immigrants has proven to be one of the most complex challenges facing successive Israeli governments. The decision to send most Ethiopians to religious state schools has further complicated this situation by reducing the options available to municipal authorities. Ethiopians are less likely to attend non-compulsory pre-school and more likely to be directed to special education than other Israelis. Many Ethiopians in elementary school achieve results worse than those of their native-born peers. Although the percentage of Ethiopian teenagers sent to Youth Aliyah boarding schools has decreased, secondary education also remains a problem. Ethiopians have the lowest percentage (12) of students who matriculate of any Israeli ethnic group. Nevertheless, special programmes and financial incentives in higher education have resulted in a steady rise in Ethiopian university enrolment. An increasing problem is the large number of youths who have either dropped out of school or whose attendance or other aspects of their behaviour have caused them to be defined as 'at risk'.

The proportion of Ethiopians serving in the Israeli army is rising: 95 per cent of Ethiopian boys (compared to 80 per cent of native Israelis) eligible for service were inducted in both 1995 and 1996.

The Ethiopians themselves usually cite their poor economic situation as their greatest problem in

Israel. Age, illness and childcare responsibilities mean that Ethiopians are less likely to be in the labour force than other Israelis. Their demographic profile produces serious economic distress when combined with high unemployment and low wages. A lack of skills means those seeking work are often unsuccessful. Local surveys reveal that more than 50 per cent of Ethiopian households have no breadwinner.

The arrival of Ethiopian immigrants has confronted the Israeli medical authorities with a variety of challenges. Many of the Ethiopians had been exposed to HIV in the Ethiopian capital. When it was discovered that blood donations of almost all Ethiopian Jews were being secretly destroyed, protests and riots resulted. This policy is currently being revised and an extensive health education programme has been developed. The trauma of their migration experiences and the shock of adapting to life in Israel have produced problems such as post-traumatic shock syndrome, depression and psychosomatic diseases.

In Ethiopia the Beta Israel were not familiar with *Halakha* (rabbinic law) and were unable to perform conversions or divorces in accordance with it. This has led to doubts as to the personal status of community members. Ethiopian religious leaders are not recognized in Israel as equivalent to rabbis. Some, however, have received training and serve on local religious councils. Recently, some Ethiopian rabbis have been trained.

The marginalization of the elders and clergy is significant. In their place a generation of young male leaders has emerged. Regional differences, political conflicts and varying lengths of residence in Israel have led to a multiplicity of organizations.

The Ethiopians' social system and cultural heritage is threatened. Their patterns of family life have been transformed and there have been changes in the social status of both women and children. Simultaneously, their distinctive religious practice, use of Ethiopian languages and oral communal heritage have been seriously weakened in the encounter with Israeli Jewish life. Although instances of institutionalized racism are comparatively few, prejudice and ignorance have had a serious impact on the Ethiopians' full integration.

## 1 Introduction

The Beta Israel (Falasha) of Ethiopia—or, as they are more commonly called today—Ethiopian Jews, may be per capita the most talked about and written about group in the world. Each time they have been ‘discovered’ and ‘rediscovered’ a flood of articles and books has ensued. The past decade alone has seen more than a dozen books, hundreds of articles and several international scientific conferences.<sup>1</sup> Yet, despite all this attention many features of Ethiopian Jewish life remain little understood. Nowhere is this truer than with regard to their immigration and adaptation to Israeli society.

Two decades ago, at the beginning of 1977, fewer than 100 Beta Israel lived in Israel. By the middle of 1997 more than 50,000 Ethiopian immigrants had settled in the country (Table 1). When the more than 16,000 children born in Israel are included (and those who have died subtracted), the Ethiopian community of Israel can be said to number close to 65,000. Seldom has any community undergone so dramatic, complete and irreversible a change in so short a period.

Owing to the speed and ongoing dynamics of these changes any attempt to document and analyze them is a daunting task. While immigration to Israel brought with it one set of immediate and highly visible changes, the ongoing transformation of Ethiopian Jewry continues to take place on a daily basis in a less visible but no less significant way.

One factor that makes an evaluation of the Ethiopian immigrants particularly difficult is the lack of reliable authoritative quantitative data. The longer Ethiopian immigrants and their children are in the country the less likely they are to be treated as a separate category or to be the concern of a single government ministry or authority. The Ministry of Immigrant Absorption, for example, has responsibility for all immigrants during their first years in the country, but thereafter their follow-up is sporadic and depends largely on voluntary reporting of births, deaths, marriages, divorces and moves from one city or another. Not only do government ministries and private groups differ among themselves regarding many figures, they often publish data which contain internal contradictions or refute claims they have made previously.<sup>2</sup> Even the most basic facts, such as

the number of Ethiopian immigrants who arrived in Israel each year, have been the subject of disagreement. In most cases, such discrepancies are minor and do not result in serious differences of opinion regarding overall trends. In such instances, we have made every effort to publish the most reliable figures from the most reputable sources. Minor variants have not been noted. However, in cases in which the differing numbers result in markedly different interpretations of the Ethiopians’ situation, we have noted such differences and their implications.

In 1994 the American Jewish Committee published a comprehensive article on Ethiopian Jews in Israel.<sup>3</sup> This article remains the single most complete source of data and information in English on Ethiopian immigrants in Israel. Yet, even though it continued to be updated until the last minute, this document is, inevitably, in need of major revision. In the intervening years the Ethiopian population in Israel has grown through *aliyah* (immigration) and internal growth from about 50,000 individuals to over 64,000. At the time of its completion, moreover, most Ethiopian immigrants had been in Israel for less than three years. Many of the major challenges they faced were directly connected to their initial settlement in the country and this report was, accordingly, rich in background data on their arrival and initial transition to life in Israel. To cite the most striking example, when the *American Jewish Yearbook* article was written, almost half the Ethiopians in the country were still in temporary housing—mobile homes, absorption centres and hotels. Their move to permanent housing and hence their encounter with host communities, schools and jobs were all to take place in the future. Today, only a comparatively small number of those who have been in Israel since 1994 remain in temporary housing.

As we document below, ongoing long-term issues including education, employment, health and social integration have taken centre stage in recent years. This report will offer only such

1 The most comprehensive bibliography on Ethiopian Jews published to date is Steven Kaplan and Shoshana Ben-Dor, *Ethiopian Jewry: An Annotated Bibliography* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute 1988). It is currently being updated by the authors of the present report.

2 In January 1996 the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption prepared a

report in English, *The Absorption of Ethiopian Immigrants in Israel: The Present Situation and Future Objectives*, which stated (p.1) ‘[S]ome 60% of the population are under the age of 18.’ In the same month it published a report in Hebrew—Uzi Gdor, ‘The Absorption of Ethiopian Immigrants 1992-1995’ (Jerusalem: Ministry of Immigrant Absorption 1996), which stated (p. 28) that 53 per cent of all Ethiopians were under the age of eighteen. An unpublished working paper entitled ‘Educational Integration of Ethiopian Immigrants in Israel’ prepared in February 1997 states (p. 2) that a total of 9,000 Ethiopians were born in Israel, but that there are 8,000 children aged 0-4. As we indicate in this report, the total number of Ethiopian children born in Israel is probably over 16,000.

3 Steven Kaplan and Chaim Rosen, ‘Ethiopian Jews in Israel’, in David Singer and Ruth R. Seldin (eds.), *American Jewish Yearbook 1994* (New York: American Jewish Committee 1994), 59-109.

background information as is necessary for an understanding of the immediate concerns which dominate the lives of Ethiopians in Israel today.

### Acknowledgements

The following people assisted us in the preparation of this report by sharing their thoughts, experiences and sources of information. We wish to express our sincere gratitude to all of them. They bear no responsibility for the contents of the report itself.

Professor Menachem Amir, Department of Criminology, Hebrew University of Jerusalem  
Mr Yehiel Aran, Joint Distribution Committee, Israel  
Mr Shmuel Azulin, Israeli Ministry of Education  
Ms Shoshana Ben-Dor, North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry  
Mr Danny Budovsky, Institute for Ethiopian Jewish Culture  
Professor Naomi Chazan, Member of Knesset  
Ms Jennifer Phillips David, doctoral student, Anthropology and Public Health, Emory University  
Ms Nivi Dayan, Joint Distribution Committee, Israel  
Ms Michal De Jung, Student Authority  
Ms Rachel Gindin, Israeli Ministry of Immigrant Absorption  
Dr Henry Gold, Israel Association for Ethiopian Jews  
Ms Ellen Goldberg, Joint Distribution Committee, Israel  
Mr David Holt, doctoral student, Political Science, University of Chicago  
Mr Rachamim Itzhak, Department of Adult Education, Ministry of Education  
Ms Ya'acov Katz, Director General, Kupat Holim Lefumit  
Mr Yossi Katz-Halevi, *Jerusalem Report*  
Mr Jack Lapidot, Prime Minister's Office (retired)  
Ms Rachel Masale, Bat Shalom  
Mr Addisu Messele, Member of Knesset, Chairman of the Board, United Ethiopian Jewish Organization  
Ms Shula Mula, Israel Association for Ethiopian Jews  
Ms Gila Noam, JDC-Brookdale Institute  
Mr Micha Oddenheimer, Israel Association for Ethiopian Jews  
Dr Marian Reiff, Medical Anthropology, Columbia University  
Dr Chaim Rosen, Israeli Ministry of Immigrant Absorption  
Dr Don Seeman, Anthropology, Harvard University  
Ms Graciela Spector, School of Education, Hebrew University  
Mr Uri Tamiat, Israel Association for Ethiopian Jews  
Mr Anbessa Teferra, instructor, Amharic, Hebrew University  
Mr David Yasu, Israeli Ministry of Immigrant Absorption  
Dr Rafael Youngmann, psychologist, Falk Institute, Jerusalem

## 2 Immigrations of Ethiopian Jews

Despite the speed with which it took place, the Ethiopian immigration was not a single event but a series of waves each with its own special characteristics. Prior to 1980, for example, only about 250 Ethiopian immigrants had come to Israel. Starting in 1980, Jews from the relatively isolated regions of Tigre and Walqayit began to migrate to refugee camps in the Sudan. Although some were to wait there for as long as two or three years, by the end of 1983 the entire population of these regions (over 4,000 people) had been taken to Israel.

As word spread of this Sudanese route, Jews from the Gondar region driven by a desire to reach Israel began to migrate as well. As conditions in the Sudan deteriorated, the Israeli government abandoned its policy of gradual immigration. Between mid-November 1984 and early January 1985, 6,700 Ethiopians were taken to Israel in what came to be known as 'Operation Moses'.<sup>4</sup>

Following an Israeli press conference confirming the airlift, the Sudanese suspended the operation, stranding hundreds of people. A few months later, the CIA-sponsored 'Operation Joshua/Sheba' brought a further 648 Jews to Israel.

From August 1985 until the end of 1989 only about 2,500 immigrants reached Israel. The restoration of diplomatic relations between Ethiopia and Israel in the autumn of 1989, however, cleared the way for a renewal of emigration in a manner agreeable to both countries. It also raised expectations among Beta Israel and, by the summer of 1990, over 20,000 Ethiopian Jews had migrated to Addis Ababa, where they faced disease, malnutrition and inadequate housing. When Ethiopian leader Mengistu Haile Mariam fled the country in mid-May as rebel forces advanced on the capital, a dramatic rescue effort was executed. During a period of thirty-six hours, between 24 and 25 May, over 14,000 Beta Israel were taken to Israel in 'Operation Solomon'.<sup>5</sup>

Even after the completion of 'Operation Solomon', small groups of Jews remained in remote provinces in Ethiopia. Over the course of time

4 For greater detail see Tudor Parfitt, *Operation Moses* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson 1985) and Louis Rapoport, *Redemption Song: The Story of Operation Moses* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1986). For a more critical perspective see Ahmed Karadawi, 'The smuggling of the Ethiopian Falasha to Israel through Sudan', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 29, no. 4, 1991, 557-81.

5 No English account of Operation Solomon has been published to date, although one is being prepared by Steven Spector of SUNY, Stony Brook. See also Ya'acov Friedmann, 'Operation Solomon: One Year and Thirty-One Hours' (Jerusalem: Amitai Publishers 1992) (in Hebrew).

most of these were contacted and efforts made to bring them to Israel. More problematic, however, is the issue of Christian Ethiopians of Jewish (Falasha) descent. Although it had generally been believed that the Beta Israel community had clearly defined borders which separated it from its Christian neighbours, in recent years this picture has been greatly revised. It is now recognized that a large community of Falasha converts also existed. Several thousand of these had migrated to Addis Ababa in 1991. Others had remained in their villages.

At the time of 'Operation Solomon' it was decided to leave these converts—known as Falas/Faras Mura—in Ethiopia. In recent years the right of these converts to come to Israel has been the subject of fierce controversy. Many have close relatives in Israel and those who have resided in Addis since 1991 have little possibility of returning to their previous villages or lives. Those residing in the Ethiopian capital (about 2,900 in January 1997) have, moreover, been exposed to Israelis and rabbinic Judaism for several years and some have even formally converted (or in the view of some 'returned') to Judaism. In November 1996 the Israeli chief rabbinate, which had hitherto been supportive of efforts to cultivate ties with the Falas Mura, withdrew this support, citing doubts about the genuineness of the converts and their connections to Judaism. Several members of the Ethiopian community also questioned the wisdom of bringing former Christians to Israel. Others, noting the high rate of HIV- positive cases (between 5 and 10 per cent) among those in Addis Ababa, have questioned the public health risk of this immigration. The Ethiopian government for its part has objected to what it views as a provocative intervention in its internal affairs and has claimed that the number of potential immigrants willing to identify themselves as converts from Judaism could be in the tens or even hundreds of thousands.<sup>6</sup>

Table 1: Immigration to Israel from Ethiopia

1948-71	167
1972-79	306
1980-89	16,965
1990-92	27,803
1993	863
1994	1,192
1995	1,312
1996	1,361
1997	1,660
Total	51,629

Source: Jerusalem, Central Bureau of Statistics

6 Steven Kaplan, 'Falasha Christians: a brief history', *Midstream*, January 1993, 20-21; Don Seeman, 'One People, One Blood: Religious Conversion, Public Health and Immigration as Social

### 3 Demographic data

Nowhere is the difficulty of acquiring reliable data concerning Ethiopian immigrants clearer than in the collection of demographic information. Since immigrants had no written documentation regarding their age or marital status, Israeli officials have had to rely on the immigrants' own personal testimony. However, few Ethiopians knew their exact date of birth. The Ethiopian calendar differs from that used in the West both with regard to the months and years. Thus, for example, the year 1997 is divided between the years 1989/90 of the Ethiopian calendar. The migration process disrupted many family units, making accurate descriptions of kinship ties difficult to obtain. In addition, immigrants quickly learned to 'work the system' by providing information most to their advantage. Thus, those in their fifties might add years in order to qualify for pensions rather than being sent to occupational training; those in their twenties might subtract years to qualify for boarding school rather than being inducted into the army or prepared for employment. Requests to 'correct' information are common.

No nationwide data exist concerning the size or composition of Ethiopian families in Israel. The Ministry of Absorption, however, has partial information on 15,558 households, which include about 80 per cent of the Ethiopians in the country.<sup>7</sup> A comparison of data on age distribution provided by the Ministry with figures on births available through the Central Bureau of Statistics makes it clear that many of the 'missing' 20 per cent are children born in Israel. (Only one in nine children born in the past five years have been reported.) In addition, patterns found in the Ministry's data can be checked against surveys conducted by the JDC-Brookdale Institute in six communities. Although not comprehensive, the combination of these sources offers a reliable overview of the demographics of the Ethiopian community in Israel.<sup>8</sup>

Experience for Ethiopian-Israelis', PhD dissertation, Harvard University 1997; Hagar Salomon, 'Between ethnicity and religiosity—internal group aspects of conversion among the Beta Israel in Ethiopia', *Pe'amim*, no. 58, 1994, 104-99.

7 This information is available through the Ministry of Absorption as a computerized database.

8 Esther Benita, 'Absorption of Ethiopian Immigrants in Permanent Housing Sites: Yavneh' (Jerusalem: JDC-Brookdale, June 1996); 'Absorption of Ethiopian Immigrants in Permanent Housing Sites: Ramle' (Jerusalem: JDC-Brookdale, November 1996); 'Absorption of Ethiopian Immigrants in Permanent Housing Sites: Kiryat Malachi' (Jerusalem: JDC-Brookdale, November 1996); Esther Benita, Gila Noam and Ruth Levy, 'Local Surveys of Ethiopian Immigrants: Findings from Afula, Netanya and Kiryat Gat' (Jerusalem: JDC-Brookdale, December 1994). All these publications are in Hebrew with English abstracts.

### Births

By 1994, 11,690 children had been born in Israel to parents of Ethiopian origin, with almost half of these (5,781) born between 1992 and 1994. Thus the total number of Ethiopian children born by mid-1997 is probably over 16,000. In other words, over a quarter of today's Ethiopian community were born in Israel.<sup>9</sup> The birth rate of around 30 per thousand is about 50 per cent higher than that found among the general Israeli population. Since 1992 births and immigration have meant a rise of almost 3,000 per year in the Ethiopian population in Israel.

### Household structure and size

Several features of the household composition are noteworthy and have serious implications for the community's social, and particularly economic, wellbeing. According to the national data (see Table 2), the number of one-parent families is about 27 per cent. This figure (about 50 per cent of all households if singles are counted) is consistent with the 24-30 per cent found in all the communities surveyed. Second, the national data (Table 3) reveal a high percentage (21.3) of households with six or more members. Indeed, even the Ministry of Absorption's partial data identify almost half of the Ethiopians as living in households with six members or more. Among these large families, moreover, almost 1,000 are headed by individuals aged 60 or older. This accords well with a JDC-Brookdale survey which found that 37 per cent of Ethiopians aged 55 and over lived in households with 8 or more members.<sup>10</sup> (Both one-parent families and families with more than six members are more common among those who arrived from May 1991 onwards.) The large number of one-parent families and the high average household size have important economic implications (see page 12) which in turn are of major consequence for housing.

Table 2: Household structure of Ethiopian Jews in Israel

	N	%
Single person	4,779	30.7
One-parent family	3,133	20.1
Couples	1,350	8.7
Couples with 1-3 children	3,109	20.0
Couples with 4 or more children	3,023	19.4
Other	164	0.1
Total households	15,558	100.0

Source: Ministry of Immigrant Absorption, March 1997

9 We would like to express our gratitude to Ms Jennifer Phillips David for allowing us to use figures from her research on fertility patterns among Ethiopian immigrants in the preparation of this section.

10 We are grateful to Ms Gila Noam of JDC-Brookdale for giving us access to the unpublished report from which this figure is excerpted.

Table 3: Household size of Ethiopian Jews in Israel

	N	%
1 person	4,779	30.7
2 persons	2,673	17.2
3 persons	1,854	11.8
4 persons	1,640	10.5
5 persons	1,318	8.5
6 persons	1,177	7.6
7 persons	856	5.5
8 persons	610	3.9
9 or more	651	4.3
Total households	15,558	100.0

Source: Ministry of Immigrant Absorption, March 1997

## 4 Housing dilemmas

### Temporary housing

Not surprisingly, housing the successive waves of Ethiopian immigrants proved one of the most complex challenges facing the Israeli immigration authorities. While comparatively small numbers of immigrants arriving as part of an orderly process could usually be accommodated in existing absorption centres or even directly settled in apartments, large 'surprise' influxes—as in the case of both 'Operation Moses' and 'Operation Solomon'—exceeded the capacity of these resources. In these cases, *ad hoc* solutions such as housing immigrants in hotels, empty apartment blocks, and mobile homes (*karavanim*) were employed. Each of these 'housing solutions' brought with it a variety of problems.

Standard absorption centres appeared to be by far the best of these options. By concentrating immigrants in separate housing, authorities were able to provide services such as Hebrew instruction, job information and health care more efficiently. On the negative side, such facilities tended to isolate immigrants from society as a whole and foster dependence upon absorption officials and the services they offered.<sup>11</sup>

Hotels were not only extraordinarily expensive (\$13,500 per year per immigrant), but also offered families virtually no opportunity for normal family life.<sup>12</sup> Most hotel residents failed to develop even the most basic skills needed for independent living and thus, after a period of several years,

11 Michael Ashkenazi and Alex Weingrod, *Ethiopian Immigrants in Beersheba* (Highland Park, Ill.: American Association for Ethiopian Jews 1984); Esther Hertzog, 'The bureaucratic absorption of Ethiopian immigrants in Israel' in Steven Kaplan, Tudor Parfitt, Emanuela Trevisan Semi (eds.), *Between Africa and Zion* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute 1995), 189-202.

12 Uzi Gdor, Rachel Astman, Hagar Salamon, 'Masterplan for the Absorption of Ethiopian Jewry' (Ministry of Immigrant Absorption 1985) (in Hebrew).

were moved not to permanent housing but to another temporary site. In the 1980s this meant a move to absorption centres only recently vacated by other immigrants; in the 1990s it usually meant a move to mobile homes.

At the time of 'Operation Moses' several hundred families were placed in previously abandoned mobile homes on the outskirts of small towns and cities. Not only were these sites even more isolated than standard absorption facilities, but their physical condition was often substandard. Despite these difficulties, the expense and disadvantages of hotel accommodations led the absorption authorities to make massive use of mobile homes for 'Operation Solomon' immigrants. Huge mobile-home settlements for both Ethiopian and Russian immigrants were erected in isolated open areas far from major concentrations of veteran Israelis. In December 1993 almost one-third of all Ethiopians in the country were living in twenty-one caravan sites, uncannily reminiscent of the tent camps (*ma'abarot*) used to house immigrants from Arab lands in the 1950s.<sup>13</sup>

#### *The move to permanent housing*

From the outset, absorption officials had a multi-faceted agenda in housing Ethiopian immigrants. They sought to limit the immigrants' stay in temporary housing and, at the same time, to avoid their concentration in large numbers in particular buildings, neighbourhoods and, especially, in economically disadvantaged peripheral towns and cities. Often these differing priorities conflicted with each other. For their part, the immigrants often wished to be housed near (extended) family members. Although some attempts were made to house Ethiopian immigrants in areas beyond Israel's 1967 borders, these were not successful: most immigrants rejected such locations as too isolated. As the list on this page indicates, all the large concentrations of Ethiopians in Israel are in pre-1967 locations. Since they arrived in waves over periods of years this frequently meant that recent arrivals asked to be housed near relatives in areas that were already 'full' of Ethiopians.

In May 1993 the Ministry of Absorption initiated a special mortgage programme for Ethiopian immigrants designed to encourage them to leave temporary housing and purchase apartments in established areas in the centre of the country. It included a grant equivalent to 90 per cent of the price of the apartment (up to a maximum of \$120,000), which could be used to acquire housing in fifty-two authorized locations believed to have the social, economic and educational

resources necessary to accommodate the new population. Special outreach and informational programmes were designed to encourage immigrants to apply for mortgages. By May 1996 only 11 per cent of the 3,620 families in caravan sites in May 1993 remained.<sup>14</sup> All told, 403 families remained in caravan sites and 200 in absorption centres and 1,420 (mainly young) singles (900 in caravan sites and 320 in absorption centres) also remained in temporary housing. In a television interview on 8 August 1997 a spokesperson for the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption claimed in response to a demonstration by Ethiopian singles not yet settled in permanent housing that their number had dropped to 567. This figure does not, however, include singles who have grown up in Israel and have not succeeded in purchasing apartments. In February 1997 only 200 families from the period of 'Operation Solomon' remained in temporary housing. Although the mortgage programme was designed to limit the number of Ethiopian families who settled in sites with weak economies and educational systems, it was not always successful. Not only did many Ethiopians find their way to poorer municipalities including Kiryat Malachi, Netivot and Ofaqim, but even within stronger communities they were often settled in undesirable neighbourhoods. Educational difficulties and high unemployment among Ethiopians are thus, in part, a consequence of their settlement in these problem-ridden areas. Israeli towns or cities with over 1,000 Ethiopians are: Haifa, Hadera, Netanya, Ashqelon, Rehovot, Ashdod, Ramle, Beer Sheva, Kiryat Malachi, Yavne, Afula, Kiryat Gat and Kiryat Yam.

At the same time, those residing in two caravan sites continued to present a major problem. These included 2,883 at Neve Carmel, which no longer receives new arrivals but is emptying out at a rate of only 40-70 a month. Hatzrot Yasaf, with 850 residents, continues to grow at a rate of 120 arrivals a month.

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## 5 Education

Providing appropriate educational frameworks for Ethiopian immigrants has always been one of the major challenges facing successive Israeli governments. Not only is this necessary when dealing with a population in which over 50 per cent are of school age, it also reflects the general tone of absorption policies which emphasize the

<sup>13</sup> Kaplan and Rosen, 'Ethiopian Jews in Israel', 84.

<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Building and Housing, 'Patterns of Absorption in Housing of Ethiopian Immigrants' (Jerusalem: Tazpit, May 1993) (in Hebrew); Ministry of Immigrant Absorption, 'The Absorption of Ethiopian Immigrants in Israel', May 1996, 3-5 (in Hebrew).

transformation of immigrant youth. Yet despite this commitment, educational policies often lagged far behind the sweep of events.<sup>15</sup> In the 1980s special programmes and even teacher-training schemes were generally not developed until after the thousands of Ethiopian students were in the educational system. More recently, a comprehensive plan for improving the educational conditions of Ethiopian children, presented in August 1995 by Dr Gadi Ben Ezer, then the head of the Ministry of Education's Centre for Ethiopian Immigrants within the Educational System, remained largely unimplemented.

Initially, it was decided that all Ethiopians would attend state religious schools during their first year in Israel. This policy, based both on political considerations and a desire to avoid the rapid secularization which confronted immigrants in the 1950s, severely limited the options available to educational authorities. At a single stroke, hundreds of schools were excluded from the absorption effort, while others were required to take on full responsibility. Even under the best of circumstances it would have been difficult to find sufficient schools close to immigrant housing which served the appropriate age groups. While calling for a total of no more than 25 per cent immigrant students in any one class, the Education ministry often found itself with entire schools which were 60-70 per cent Ethiopian.

While parents were allowed to transfer their children after the first year, few Ethiopian adults were sufficiently familiar with the schools to take such an initiative. Even though this requirement was eventually dropped, the bulk of Ethiopian students remain in the state religious schools. In 1988 92 per cent of Ethiopian students were in the state religious school system and in 1995 this figure had declined only slightly to 86 per cent. Overall, they make up about 10 per cent of pupils in the state religious system and only about 1 per cent of those in secular schools. As late as the 1996-7 school year (September 1996-June 1997), there were still twenty-five elementary schools with more than 25 per cent Ethiopian enrolment and many exceeded this proportion. Ethiopian teenagers comprised over 70 per cent of the students residing in several religious boarding schools.<sup>16</sup>

15 Teshome Wagaw, *For Our Soul: Ethiopian Jews in Israel* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1993); Israeli Association for Ethiopian Jews, *Step-Children of the Educational System* (Jerusalem: IAEJ 1995); 'Educational Integration of Ethiopian Immigrants in Israel', unpublished, JDC, February 1997; Shalva Weil, 'Religious Beliefs and Practices of Ethiopian Jews in Israel' (Jerusalem: Institute for Innovation in Education 1988), 13-19 (in Hebrew).

16 'Educational Integration . . .'; Gdor, 'The Absorption . . .', 28-37.

Schools with Ethiopian pupils who arrived after 1991 receive funding for extra teaching hours (1.7 hours per student per week for each qualifying student). Although designed to improve the situation of Ethiopian students, this programme also serves to encourage some schools to hold on to a large number of immigrant students regardless of the overall ratio produced. There is, of course, supposed to be official monitoring to guarantee that these funds are applied to the benefit of Ethiopian children, but questions have been posed as to their usage and the quality of teaching provided during these hours.

During the first year of schooling most Ethiopian youngsters were put in special 'absorption classes'. In practice, many remained in such frameworks well behind the first year and thus were effectively isolated from other Israeli students. As late as 1993, 30 per cent were still studying in separate classes, but by the 1995-6 school year this figure had dropped to 5 per cent.<sup>17</sup>

Yet another factor furthering the isolation of Ethiopian students was a tendency to direct them towards special education classes. According to the Ministry of Education, in the 1996-7 school year 375 Ethiopian students were in special education with a further 900 Ethiopians defined as being 'at risk'. Critics argue that cultural misunderstandings, parents' lack of familiarity with the school system, and the school interest in the additional funds available to those in special education have combined to result in a disproportionate number of Ethiopians being sent to special education. More sophisticated and culturally appropriate diagnostic tools are clearly needed.<sup>18</sup>

Although no national figures are available, community studies indicate that the number of Ethiopian children in pre-school frameworks is well below the national average. At age 2, 25 per cent of Ethiopians are in pre-schools vs 70 per cent of other Israelis; at age 3, 50 per cent of Ethiopians as compared to 95 per cent of other Israelis; and at age 4, 90 per cent of Ethiopians as compared to 99 per cent of all Israelis.<sup>19</sup>

While informed policies effectively implemented by the Ministry of Education are clearly the cornerstone for the integration and advancement of Ethiopian students, many programmes which target specific groups have developed. Some are

17 'Immigrant Absorption: Situation, Challenges and Goals' (Jerusalem: Ministry of Immigrant Absorption, April 1996), 53 (in Hebrew).

18 'They're not mentally handicapped; they're Ethiopian', *Hila News* 2, Summer 1996, 5-6; Cf. *Ma'ariv*, 29 December 1995.

19 'Educational Integration'. . . , 4.

primarily funded by government on the local or national level, while others are largely funded by non-governmental organizations.<sup>20</sup>

### *High schools and Youth Aliyah*

Youth Aliyah was founded in 1932 by the American philanthropist Henrietta Szold and accepted its first parentless children from Germany in 1933. During the 1950s numerous immigrant children from the Middle East and North Africa were separated from their parents and educated in Youth Aliyah institutions in the hope of speeding their acculturation. Despite the grave misgivings which developed regarding such policies in the 1980s, over 96 per cent of Ethiopian teenagers were placed in youth villages. What began as a method to care for those who had arrived without parents became a standard track for Ethiopian youths. In 1993 Ethiopian students represented 37 per cent of those learning in Youth Aliyah schools, but were 65 per cent of those in religious youth villages. In February 1996, 4,535 of the approximately 12,000 Ethiopian students in grades 7-12 were in 75 schools of Youth Aliyah.<sup>21</sup>

Criticisms of Youth Aliyah can be divided into two categories. On the most general level, serious questions exist concerning the long-term effects of removing teenagers from their families and weakening their links to local communities. Educationally, Ethiopian youth often found themselves in classes with other weak students placed in boarding schools or sent to Youth Aliyah classrooms because of family and personal difficulties. Within the boarding schools Ethiopian high school students were overwhelmingly placed in vocational tracks that offered virtually no opportunity for matriculation (admission to post-secondary education). Indeed, many often trained in vocational courses with only limited practical relevance.

Only about 12 per cent of Ethiopians (239 students) successfully passed matriculation exams (*bagrut*) at the end of the 1996-7 school year—an improvement over the previous year's 10 per cent (and the 7 per cent in 1994-5), but still a lower figure than that of any other group in Israel. In 1996-7, 45 per cent of Jewish students and 23 per cent of Arab students passed matriculation exams.<sup>22</sup> Recently, Youth Aliyah has revised its policies so that 80 per cent of those in boarding schools are now in non-vocational tracks. Few, however, are expected to be able to meet

the full matriculation certificate requirements.

While the percentage of Ethiopians studying in boarding schools has declined, the resources previously invested in their education have not generally been transferred to their local community junior and senior high schools. Many parents have thus found themselves confronted with new expenses to be paid out of their usually limited resources.

### *Youth at risk*

Perhaps the most troubling phenomenon regarding Ethiopian children is the large number of youths who have either dropped out of school, or whose attendance or other aspects of their behaviour have caused them to be defined as 'at risk'. No exact figures regarding their number exist but 900 youngsters have been identified and are receiving some sort of attention or treatment. This figure is based on only a portion of the community and some officials claim that the total number is closer to 1,800.<sup>23</sup> Further support for these figures is found in statistics from the Ministry of Education according to which 1,044 Ethiopians were in 12th grade in the 1996-7 school year; approximately 55 per cent of the Ethiopians were in that age group. According to the Israel State Comptroller, local authorities reach only about half of such youths in the general population.<sup>24</sup> Confirmation of this troubling trend, if not of the precise numbers, is found in the dramatic rise in police files opened against Ethiopian youths. In 1994 this number was 53, in 1995 it was 59, but in 1996 it rose dramatically to 150. Most cases involved either property offences or public disturbances and all but a handful of cases (9 during a period of three years) concern young men.<sup>25</sup>

### *Higher education*

Only a small percentage of Ethiopian immigrants arrived in Israel after having completed secondary education. Absorption authorities including the Jewish Agency, the Student Authority and the Ministry of Absorption set up special preparatory courses to give those who seemed qualified for higher education an opportunity to acclimatize and qualify for admission to universities. Although not always immediately successful, these programmes were often expanded to include a second year of preparation. At the same time, standardized tests, such as the nationally administered psychometric exams, were found to

20 Ibid., 12-15.

21 Kaplan and Rosen, 90; Youth Aliyah, unpublished paper, 2 February 1996 (in Hebrew).

22 *Ha'Aretz*, 28 June 1997.

23 The Public Council for the Prevention of Crime in Israel (Matsila), unpublished paper, 12 February 1997 (in Hebrew).

24 State Comptroller, Annual Report, no. 47, 1997, 511-23.

25 Ibid.; Ministry of Internal Security, 'Suspects According to Country of Origin, 1994-96', unpublished (in Hebrew).

be relatively weak predictors of Ethiopian students' performance and hence given less weight than usual in admission decisions. Such programmes and decisions offered access to university training to students who might not normally have qualified.

In recent years, as the number of Ethiopian educated immigrants has declined, their place has been taken by Ethiopian Jews who have grown up, and been educated, in Israel. As was noted above, relatively few of these students qualified for university admission. However, many others have been directed to the pre-academic programmes available at different universities. These include a special programme for Ethiopians at Haifa University and regular preparatory studies at the country's other campuses.

The encouragement offered Ethiopian students has not been limited to special programmes and sensitive admissions conditions. Ethiopian students—both those who came to the country as immigrants and those born in Israel—receive enhanced financial assistance enabling them to pursue higher education. These include grants for tuition, student housing, auxiliary tutoring and living stipends. The Student Authority, a joint agency of the Ministry of Absorption and Jewish Agency, sponsors all Ethiopian students who study in accredited BA programmes (up to the age of thirty and up to six years of study). In the 1995-6 school year the funding for *mechina* (college preparatory course) students alone amounted to almost \$1 million—about \$2,000 per student.<sup>26</sup> All the above have resulted in a continuous rise in the number of Ethiopian students studying in colleges and universities. According to the Student Authority there were 787 (385 male and 402 females) Ethiopian students registered in January 1997—500 in regular university studies and 287 in pre-academic studies. These include 281 at Haifa University, 80 at Bar-Ilan and 79 at Ben Gurion University.<sup>27</sup>

## 6 Army

Military service has long been one of the most important symbols of membership of Israeli society. Those who are routinely excluded from such service—most notably Israeli Arabs and the ultra-orthodox—have to a significant extent opted

out of, or been excluded from, the mainstream of Israeli life. In June 1993, 850 Ethiopians were on active duty, including 17 officers. By 1996 these numbers had doubled with about 1,750 serving including 150 women (a rise of over 300 per cent over the number three years earlier). There are currently 40 officers on active duty (including 6 women) and an additional 28 officers were serving in the reserves. Of those Ethiopian men serving, 23 per cent are in combat units, compared to 20 per cent among the native Israeli population.<sup>28</sup>

This sharp rise in the number of Ethiopians serving in the army results from the fact that 95 per cent of boys (compared to 80 per cent of native Israelis) eligible for service were inducted in both 1995 and 1996. Indeed, the army routinely waives some of its requirements for Ethiopian inductees. Although generally a successful policy, some feel this generous admissions' policy is one of the factors behind a number of suicides among Ethiopian recruits—ten in the past four years, according to the army.<sup>29</sup> Also cited in connection with the suicides are 'hazing' (a common experience of recruits) and at times outright racism (on the part of individual soldiers) encountered by Ethiopian soldiers. Indeed, while it is generally denied by military sources, some observers claim that the Ethiopian community's general difficulties and particularly the 'blood scandal' (see page 13) have resulted in a lessening of motivation among Ethiopian inductees.

## 7 Employment

Although issues of religious status and medical treatment have produced the most dramatic eruptions of Ethiopian protest since the Ethiopians' arrival in Israel, most surveys indicate that economic concerns are the most common chronic problem for most Ethiopian households.<sup>30</sup>

Ethiopians' problems in finding employment can be divided into two parts. Having lived primarily in Ethiopia as subsistence farmers and rural craftsmen, most Ethiopians arrived in Israel with few skills which were marketable in Israel's

26 Society for the Advancement of Education: Office of Pre-Academic Studies, 3 November 1996, unpublished (in Hebrew).

27 These figures were obtained from the Student Authority in May 1997. The Ministry of Immigrant Absorption, citing the same source, claimed that 1,207 Ethiopians were enrolled in higher education. We were unable to identify the source of this discrepancy.

28 Kaplan and Rosen, 94; Army Education Corps, quoted in the Public Council for the Prevention of Crime in Israel, unpublished paper, 12 February 1997. Malka Shabtay, 'The experience of Ethiopian Jewish soldiers in the Israeli army: the process of identity formulation within the military context', *Israel Social Science Research*, vol.10, no. 2, 1995, 69-80.

29 In private discussions several members of the Ethiopian community cited a much higher figure.

30 Unless otherwise noted, statistics given on p. 12 on employment are derived from JDC-Brookdale community surveys cited above. All these figures were gathered during the sharp rise in general unemployment in 1996 and the first half of 1997.

modern and modernizing economy. In addition, long periods of enforced inactivity, whether in the Sudan or Addis Ababa, fostered dependence on others. This pattern continued in Israel during the stay in hotels, absorption centres and caravan sites. Although programmes were developed to occupy immigrants in Addis Ababa and upon their arrival, the move to permanent housing frequently meant leaving one job and beginning the job search yet again.<sup>31</sup>

Although in April 1996 the Ministry of Absorption published figures which indicated that over 80 per cent of Ethiopians in selected towns are employed, these figures must be read with extreme caution.<sup>32</sup> The figures are drawn from ten localities in which families took advantage of special mortgages to purchase homes. As will be seen below, they are completely different from the JDC-Brookdale community surveys. First, all employment figures relate to those between ages 15-65 counted as being in the labour force, i.e. employed or looking for work. Those who do not work because of illness, age (more than 50 per cent of Ethiopians are under age 15 or over age 65), studies (the vast majority of those aged 15-18) or childcare responsibilities are, for example, not counted in the labour force. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics, in the general Israeli public 16 per cent of all Jewish men and 34 per cent of women were not part of the labour force in 1995. Among Ethiopian immigrants local surveys conducted in 1995 and 1996 reveal a much higher percentage of men (19-31 per cent) and women (58-86 per cent) who are not part of the labour force. In the former case, this is usually due to illness, while in the latter case either illness or household and childcare responsibilities keep women out of the workforce. Thus, it is probable that close to 50 per cent of Ethiopian adults who are not working do not figure in unemployment figures. On the other hand, it should be noted that significant numbers of immigrants, particularly women, work in the informal sector doing household work which is not reported to the authorities in order to avoid paying taxes and jeopardizing their welfare benefits.<sup>33</sup>

Overall employment figures therefore tend to mask the economic situation of Ethiopian immigrants. Local surveys from 1995 and 1996 indicate, for example, that in some municipalities more than 30 per cent of households headed by

an Ethiopian couple have no breadwinner and among single parents (usually mothers) this number is often 85 per cent or higher. (Variants usually reflect general employment figures in the different cities.) These families are usually dependent on welfare payments, unemployment insurance or other social assistance.

In general, unemployment is higher among those aged 40 and above. Indeed, men aged 25-45 are about the only group among Ethiopians whose employment rates are consistently similar to the rest of the Israeli population. Among women of all ages, in contrast, both the percentage of those in the labour force and of those employed is generally much lower than that of their Israeli counterparts. Again it must be remembered that there are women who work in the informal sector cleaning and doing other menial jobs who do not appear in official statistics. Overall, however, Israeli policies intended to encourage women to work outside the household and to find employment in other than menial tasks have not been successful. In part, at least, this represents a continuation of the traditional pattern in which the household was viewed as the woman's sphere and care for the usually large number of children primarily her responsibility. Women in Israel who deviate from this model are often met with disapproval on the part of their family. Nevertheless, social security and other government programmes give women a far wider range of options than was the case in Ethiopia and some do take advantage of these, either within the framework of marriage or outside it.

Even when Ethiopian immigrants are employed many find themselves at the bottom of the economic ladder pursuing unskilled low paying jobs. Their households, are, moreover, usually large with six or more members. When these are complex households in which there are more than two adults, this may make possible a degree of economic security. More frequently, even when they work extra shifts or long hours, Ethiopian householders have difficulty making ends meet. The growing number of Ethiopian teenagers living in their communities and not at Youth Aliyah boarding schools (see page 10), has, for example, increased their families' economic burdens, because the sums spent on them by the schools is not transferred to the families, who must now meet all their expenses.

During the decade 1985-95 large sums were spent on vocational training programmes. Some of these—most notably those which not only provided certification but also assistance in job placement—have proven moderately successful. Comparatively little is being done in this area

31 Kaplan and Rosen, 94-6.

32 Ministry of Immigrant Absorption, 'Immigrant Absorption . . .', 52.

33 This phenomenon is, of course, not limited to Ethiopian immigrants, as witnessed by the latest State Comptroller's Report, no. 47, 1997, 534-48.

today.<sup>34</sup> Most programmes that do exist appear to lack a clear picture of either the Ethiopians' strengths or weaknesses as employees or the niches they might fill in the Israeli economy. They have a 'hit-and-miss' quality. Given this situation and the mixed record of vocational training to date, the top priority in this area is probably the formation of a consortium of all the groups, governmental and non-governmental, working in the area of employment. Such a group would pool information, promote research where necessary and co-ordinate activities.

## 8 Health issues

The arrival of Ethiopian immigrants has confronted the Israeli medical authorities with a variety of challenges.<sup>35</sup> Not only did many arrive with unfamiliar problems, but most had only a limited understanding of the Western bio-medical system. Moreover, each wave of immigrants presented a slightly different health profile. Those who survived the journey to, and life-threatening conditions in, the Sudan usually arrived in Israel in poor physical shape. Most suffered from malnutrition and parasites and many had contracted malaria. The medical care offered in the 1990s to those who passed through Addis Ababa saved countless lives. Parasitic infections, Hepatitis B and tuberculosis remained common. In contrast to Russian immigrants, many of whom were older and came to Israel with chronic and even terminal diseases, the Ethiopians were a comparatively young population and generally presented a positive health profile.

One particularly troubling phenomenon among Operation Solomon immigrants, however, was the high rate of exposure to HIV/AIDS.<sup>36</sup> Although HIV was not found among either 'Operation Moses' immigrants or those who arrived until 1990, 226 of approximately 10,000 immigrants tested in

1991 were found to be carriers. Health officials tried to find a balance between taking necessary precautions, educating the Ethiopian community, and avoiding stigmatizing the entire community. While medical personnel were warned to treat Ethiopians as a 'high-risk group' and sporadic educational programmes were begun in the community, public discussion of the problem and related policy decisions were suppressed. While stories occasionally appeared both in Israel and abroad warning of the problem, government officials publicly played down the significance of the issue.

On 24 January 1996 the Hebrew daily *Ma'ariv* ran a story revealing that officials of the Magen David blood bank had for years been routinely (and without notifying the donors) disposing of blood donated by Ethiopians. A few days later several thousand Ethiopians and supporters demonstrated outside the prime minister's office against what they viewed as a racist policy. Unprecedented violence flared as the 'blood scandal' proved to be the catalyst for the expression of frustrations over a wide range of topics. In response, a commission chaired by the former Israeli president, Itzhak Navon, was set up. In July 1996 it released its report, which noted that Ethiopians were carriers in 550 of approximately 1,386 HIV-positive cases already identified in Israel.<sup>37</sup> In considering these figures it must be remembered that Ethiopian immigrants have been tested in far greater numbers than any other group in Israel. However, their rate remains noticeably higher than that of the general population even if one assumes that there are several thousand undiagnosed cases among other Israelis: Ethiopian males 2.8 per cent, women 1.6 per cent, general public, men 0.003 per cent, women 0.0005 per cent; drug users 4 per cent, homosexuals 1.1 per cent, hemophiliacs 20 per cent. Because of the high rate of HIV-positive immigrants among recent arrivals Ethiopians comprised 80 per cent of new HIV-positive cases in Israel in 1996. Ironically and tragically, Kupat Holim Leumit (The National Health Fund), which treats most Ethiopians immediately upon their arrival in the country, is the only fund which does not offer treatment with the newest drugs for HIV. The Navon Commission also reported that the percentage of HIV-positive cases among immigrants from Ethiopia had risen from 3 per cent in 1992 to 8 per cent among those who arrived during the first three months of 1996. In 1996 14 out of 15 children born with HIV in Israel were Ethiopians.<sup>38</sup> The Navon Commission

34 Chen Lifshitz and Michal Wolfson, 'Follow-up Study of Ethiopian Immigrants Who Graduated from Vocational Training Courses: Summary Report' (Jerusalem: JDC-Brookdale, January 1996) (in Hebrew). The most recent report of the Israel State Comptroller was critical of vocational training programmes for the public at large, *Ha'Aretz*, 8 May 1997.

35 Two issues—vol. 27, no. 5, May 1991, and vol. 29, no. 6-7, June-July 1993—of the *Israel Journal of Medical Sciences*, comprising a total of over forty articles, are devoted to health issues concerning Ethiopian immigrants.

36 Unless otherwise noted, all statistics on HIV/AIDS among Ethiopians are derived from the Navon Commission's report, 'State of Israel, The Commission to Investigate the Blood Donation Episode of Ethiopian Immigrants' (Jerusalem, July 1996) (in Hebrew). For an important analysis of the underlying issues behind this report see Don Seeman, 'One people, one blood' and Hagar Salomon, 'Blood between the Beta Israel and their Christian neighbours in Ethiopia—key symbols in inter-group contexts', *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore*, no. 15, 1993, 117-43 (in Hebrew).

37 *Ha'Aretz*, 19 February 1997.

38 *Yerushalim*, 8 August 1997, 18. According to this article, the number of Ethiopians testing positive for HIV was 638 as of August 1997.

advocated a policy which identified blood donors not on the basis of ethnic origin but on the basis of a series of questions regarding residence in countries where HIV was widespread or sexual contact with residents of such countries. In practice, such questions would identify most Ethiopian immigrants and all those who arrived in Israel after 1991 as being 'high risk'. The committee also advocated extensive efforts to educate the Ethiopian community concerning the dangers of the disease.

While generally welcoming the call for educational programmes, most Ethiopians continued to be bitter over the secrecy which lay behind the initial decision and resented policies which continued to treat most Ethiopian adults as a high risk group. Ethiopians are also the only group of immigrants in which all adults are subjected to testing for HIV on arrival in Israel. In keeping with the Navon Commission's recommendations the Ministry of Health prepared a 6 million shekel proposal for an educational programme, the implementation of which began in April 1997. The Ministry sought to sidestep the issue of donation policy by consulting with the Ethiopians' religious leaders rather than their young activists.

Although far less dramatic than AIDS, a number of other conditions and diseases, including diabetes, tuberculosis and hepatitis, have posed challenges to the Ethiopian community and Israeli health authorities. Moreover, the growing public perception of Ethiopian immigrants (regardless of their date of arrival) as carriers of infectious diseases threatens their integration into Israeli society.

Perhaps the most surprising health issue has been nutrition.<sup>39</sup> While malnutrition does not plague the Israeli population, special difficulties face Ethiopian immigrants. The transition to a modern diet rich in processed foods and heavy sugar (particularly with regard to children) has had deleterious effects on the Ethiopian public. While some attempts have been made to import and even grow their traditional iron-rich grain *te'ef* in Israel, many Ethiopians have replaced it with bleached flour and other cheaper, but far less nutritious, substitutes. Within only a year or two the Ethiopians' excellent dental health had declined to the point where the rate of cavities equalled that of their Israeli counterparts.

The challenges inherent in educating the Ethiopians on the intricacies of proper nutrition are repeated in almost every area of health

39 Dina Lipsky and Dorit Reinfeld, 'Nutritional Practices of Ethiopian Immigrants' (Jerusalem: JDC 1994) (in Hebrew).

education.<sup>40</sup> Prior to their migration most Ethiopians had little or no experience with Western bio-medicine. They continued to rely heavily on methods of healing and healers from their traditional medical system. This system has survived and even flourished in Israel.

This is particularly the case in the area of mental health care.<sup>41</sup> The trauma of their migration experiences, coupled with the shock of adapting to life in Israel, has taken a heavy toll on many Ethiopians. Behaviours which are interpreted by Israel mental health practitioners as post-traumatic shock syndrome, depression and psychosomatic diseases are seen by many Ethiopians as manifestations of *zar* (spirit possession), evil eye and witchcraft. Psychologists and psychiatrists must abandon their familiar cultural categories to provide effective treatment.

By far the most troubling feature of some Ethiopians' problems in adjusting to life in Israel has been a relatively high rate of suicides.<sup>42</sup> Although exact statistics are not available, most authorities believe that suicides are proportionately much higher among Ethiopian immigrants than among the rest of the Israeli population. It seems that the causes of Ethiopian suicides appear as diverse as the problems they face on the way to and in Israel: these include domestic difficulties, extended unemployment, concerns for relatives still in Ethiopia, illness including AIDS and difficulties adjusting to life in the army.

## 9 Religious status

### *The conversion controversy*

Prior to the 'blood scandal' of 1996, the most sensitive issues around which Ethiopian immigrants mobilized were generally related to their religious status.<sup>43</sup> Although the Israeli chief rabbis had recognized the 'Jewishness' of the Ethiopians as a community, they continued to raise doubts regarding the personal status of individuals. Since the Ethiopians had not been familiar with *Halakha* their religious leaders (*qessotch*) could not have performed valid divorces and conversions. Thus,

40 For examples of the health education programmes designed for Ethiopian immigrants see the articles in *Israel Journal of Medical Sciences*, vol. 29, no. 6-7, 1993, 422-42.

41 See, for example, the articles in Miriam Barash and Dina Lipsky (eds.), *Cross-Cultural Issues in Mental Health: Ethiopian Populations* (Jerusalem: JDC 1995).

42 Ariel Arieli and Seffefe Ayche, 'Psychopathological aspects of the Ethiopian immigration to Israel', *Israel Journal of Medical Sciences*, vol. 29, no. 6-7, 1993, 411-18.

43 Steven Kaplan, 'The Beta Israel and the rabbinate: law, politics and ritual', *Social Science Information*, vol. 27, no. 3, 1988, 357-70.

virtually the entire community was suspect of being either (in the former case) illegitimate or (in the latter case) not fully Jewish.

The first Ethiopians who arrived in Israel were required to undergo a modified conversion ceremony which included ritual immersion, the acceptance of rabbinic law and (in the case of men) symbolic recircumcision. The last of these demands was dropped in late 1984. Initially, most immigrants accepted these ceremonies either because they did not understand them or because they wished to be fully accepted as Jews in Israel. From late 1985, however, opposition to the ritual demands grew. This resistance eventually culminated in a month-long strike opposite the headquarters of the chief rabbis in the autumn of 1985.

Although an agreement was reached which put an end to this strike, many issues under dispute were not resolved for several years. The Ethiopians' 'Jewishness' remains one of the most sensitive issues facing the Ethiopian community. In June 1989 Rabbi David Chelouche, Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Netanya, was appointed marriage registrar for all Ethiopians in the country. Since he did not believe that Ethiopians needed to undergo any form of conversion, those who married under his auspices were exempted from any pre-conditions not imposed on other Israelis. Eventually, other rabbis under his auspices also agreed to follow suit. While the chief rabbis viewed this as a compromise which both protected their authority and the dignity of the immigrants, many Ethiopians viewed it as a form of discrimination. Some chose to marry through ceremonies conducted by their own priests. Although such marriages were not themselves recognized by the state, when accompanied by registration through a notary public they provided couples with all the rights of a married couple.

#### *The role of the qessim*

The dispute with the rabbinate over marriages reflected one aspect of the anomalous situation faced by the Ethiopian communities' *qessotch* (priests) or, as they are called in Hebrew, *qessim*.<sup>44</sup> In Ethiopia these religious officials led religious services, and performed weddings, funerals, divorces, ritual slaughter and sacrifices. They were usually influential community leaders, with strong ties to their local society and individual members. When they arrived in Israel, this community-based pattern of leadership was shattered. Lacking even the most minimal

familiarity with rabbinic traditions, they were denied the authority to perform marriages, divorces, funerals and other rituals for their fellow immigrants. Yet, paradoxically, the Israeli authorities frequently cited their desire to preserve community traditions and often appeared at public ceremonies flanked by large numbers of *qessim*.

In early 1992 a group of young activists organized a series of demonstrations demanding that the Israeli authorities recognize the *qessim* as spiritual-ritual leaders of the Ethiopian community. The chief rabbis refused, noting that to do so would mean granting the Ethiopians status as a separate community like the Karaites and prejudice their status among other Jews. In November 1992 an inter-ministerial committee recommended that all *qessim* be given paid positions on their local religious councils. Not all local councils have been willing to incorporate Ethiopian officials and in some cases local Ethiopians have objected to the specific *qes* appointed in their community. Nevertheless, bridges are being built and tensions have been reduced in this manner.

Some *qessim* and a number of young Ethiopians have sought to avoid confrontation with the rabbinic authorities by immersing themselves in rabbinic traditions and attempting to close the gap between their community and other Jews. About a dozen have even been ordained as rabbis. Here too training programmes, even if completed successfully, have not always resulted in appropriate job placements.

#### *Ethiopian Jews and Israeli Judaisms*

The status of the Ethiopians as Jews and the position of their *qessim* have been the most visible issues in the encounter between the Beta Israel and Israel orthodoxy. More privately, almost all Ethiopians have had to find some compromise between maintaining their own traditions as practised in Ethiopia and completely accepting the dictates of the Israeli religious establishment. Since, as we have noted, most of their children attend state religious schools, their daily lives deeply immerse them in a form of Judaism foreign to their parents. While Hebrew prayers, post-exilic holidays and symbols such as the Star of David had made their way into some villages in Ethiopia, many immigrants had little or no familiarity with 'normative' Judaism. Many women found the expectation that they would abandon or radically change their traditional practice of isolation during their menstrual periods and after childbirth particularly stressful. Other immigrants had trouble adjusting to eating the meat of animals which had not been slaughtered in their presence.

44 Cf. for example, Steven Kaplan and Chaim Rosen, 'Ethiopian immigrants to Israel: between preservation of culture and invention of tradition', *Jewish Journal of Sociology*, vol. 35, no. 1, 1993.

In the past, immigrants to Israel have tended to establish their own synagogues, which preserve their distinctive ethnic practices and forms. Although there are numerous Ethiopian communities in the country, only two have founded their own synagogues. Efforts have also been made to adapt some traditional Beta Israel practices. *Sigd*, a pilgrimage holiday which commemorates the return from the exile as described in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah, is annually celebrated in Jerusalem.<sup>45</sup>

## 10 Communal organization and political leadership

Although the Ethiopian reaction to the 'blood scandal' was unusual because of its extent and its unprecedented violence, it was only the latest in a series of political initiatives taken by Ethiopian immigrants. Concerns over immigration, religious status, housing and medical care had all sparked strikes, protests and marches. Indeed, it is difficult to think of any community in Israel that has demonstrated as great a readiness as the Ethiopians to form organizations and stage protests.

At least in part, the multiplicity of Ethiopian organizations can be traced directly to either patterns in Ethiopia or circumstances related to their arrival in Israel.<sup>46</sup> The Beta Israel community in Ethiopia was actually a loosely defined web of villages and local groupings sharing religious, cultural and kinship ties. No community-wide institutions existed on the political or social level. Traditional community divisions often followed regional identities found among the general Ethiopian population. In the twentieth century contacts with world Jewry and differing rates of modernization further exacerbated tensions between different regions.

The move to Israel not only accelerated changes which were already taking place in Ethiopia, but also introduced new sources of divisiveness. While Israeli absorption officials had expected to be able to deal with a single united Ethiopian community, they found themselves confronted by a divided group with numerous claimants to the

mantle of leadership. Already in the early 1980s Tigrean Jews clashed with Gondaris, who arrived later but quickly became numerically dominant.<sup>47</sup> For many years family reunification and support for further immigration from Ethiopia were the issues which united virtually all Ethiopians and even here disagreements existed over tactics.

The willingness of immigration authorities to co-opt their most vocal critics by offering them funding for their organizations or employment as advisors encouraged the formation of dozens of pro-Ethiopian groups in the 1980s. Talented individuals often rose to prominence by demonstrating their ability to organize demonstrations, embarrass the government and present their case to the media. In 1990 the leaders of seven prominent Ethiopian organizations united to form an umbrella group, the United Ethiopian Jewish Organization. This move was strongly encouraged by the Jewish Agency and other absorption authorities, which provided the organization with 1 million shekels in 1996. Using these resources, the umbrella organization has vigorously sought to consolidate its position as the official representative of Ethiopian Jewry. It organizes the largest annual celebration of *Sigd*, a unique Beta Israel festival celebrated in November, and the Memorial ceremony for those who died on the way to Israel. It publishes the country's only monthly magazine in Amharic and Tigrinya, *Fana* (The Torch), and supports various programmes for Ethiopian immigrants both financially and organizationally.<sup>48</sup>

Despite the UEJO's attempt to portray itself as the sole legitimate representative of the Ethiopian community, it has never held community-wide elections to test this claim and has been widely criticized within the Ethiopian community. Critics claim it is unrepresentative and dominated by a small group of immigrants, most of whom reached Israel prior to 1988. Other independent organizations continue to exist, particularly on the local level or focused on specific causes such as the Falas Mura (see page 6). Relationships between the UEJO and other organizations remain strained.

### *Political parties and electoral politics*

The chairman of the UEJO is Addisu Messele, a prominent Ethiopian activist who came to Israel in the early 1980s. In 1996 Messele was elected to

45 Shoshana Ben-Dor, 'The sigd of Beta Israel: testimony to a community in transition' in Michael Ashkenazi and Alex Weingrod (eds.), *Ethiopian Jews and Israel* (New Brunswick: Transaction Press 1987), 140-59.

46 For a historical overview see Steven Kaplan, 'Leadership and communal organization among the Beta Israel: an historical study', *Encyclopaedia Judaica Year Book 1986/1987* (Jerusalem: Keter 1987), 154-63.

47 G. Jan Abbink, 'The Falashas in Ethiopia and Israel: the problem of ethnic assimilation', *Nijmegen Sociaal Anthropologische Cahiers*, no. 15, 1984, 174-88, 293-314.

48 United Ethiopian Jewish Organization, 'Information Sheet', May 1997.

fill the slot reserved for immigrants on the Labour Party list of Knesset candidates and in May he became the first Ethiopian MK. Although Messele was chosen as the first Ethiopian MK, questions remain about the community's electoral clout. Since close to 60 per cent of all Ethiopians are aged under eighteen, their political power rests more on their skills at extra-parliamentary action than on the votes they can muster. Israel's 120 members of parliament are elected by proportional representation on the *national* level. A minimum of 1.5 per cent of the vote (45,700 votes in the 1996 election) is required to win a seat. The number of eligible Ethiopian voters is under 35,000. In the past the prime minister was elected by the parliament; in 1996, for the first time, there were direct elections for the prime ministership. Here again, the 'Ethiopian vote' is not a major factor. While no scientific studies have been conducted, most observers believe that the Ethiopians voted overwhelmingly not for Labour candidate Shimon Peres but for Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu and parties on the right of the political spectrum. This voting pattern is based both on their perception that it was only when the Likud came to power that Ethiopians were brought to Israel, and on their sympathy for nationalist and religious programmes.

#### *Elders and experience*

In Ethiopia there were no community-wide institutions and local leaders such as the elders and the *qessotch* played a major role in daily life.<sup>49</sup> They had, however, only limited power and depended on experience and their skills in achieving a consensus rather than coercion to enforce their dictates. Although it was a strongly patriarchal society, senior women also possessed considerable influence and were widely consulted on issues such as childbirth, illness and disputes between younger women. However, already in Ethiopia their authority had begun to decline. Modern education, and in later years the Marxist revolution of 1974, were only two of the factors which weakened traditional patterns of communal organization and leadership.

As we have discussed in our consideration of religious organization, the status of the elders and priests deteriorated rapidly when they reached Israel. Faced with unfamiliar challenges in a strange new land, their years of accumulated experience were largely irrelevant. Settled haphazardly around the country, their reputation for shrewdness accumulated on a village level evaporated. The immigration authorities generally

saw them not as a resource but as a problematic group that would never fit in in Israel. The marginalization of the elders and clergy was significant, not only for its impact on them but also for its effect on the community at large. At precisely the time when the Ethiopian community was experiencing extreme difficulties, one of its important institutions for dealing with crises was itself in crisis. While some organizations have attempted in recent years to consult and mobilize community elders, most are isolated and ignored.

In their place a generation of young leaders has emerged as the most vocal spokespersons of the Ethiopian community. Valued by Israeli policy-makers because of their ability to speak Hebrew, understand Israeli society and move from confrontation to co-operation, they quickly replaced older immigrants as representatives both of and to the Ethiopian immigrants. Although frequently allied with prominent elders and religious leaders, these young, predominately male activists have largely dominated the Ethiopian community's dealings with the Israeli authorities.<sup>50</sup>

## **11 Family organization**

The emergence of a young leadership replacing the traditional patriarchs is a reflection in the public arena of one of the major changes occurring in Ethiopian family life. In brief, the changes being experienced by Ethiopian families in Israel can be divided into two types. On the one hand, many of the functions traditionally dealt with by household or family groups are now the responsibility of outside official bodies. These include education, employment, care for the aged and housing. At the same time, roles within the family have been drastically redefined in relation to the positions of children and women.<sup>51</sup>

The first of the changes has been dealt with extensively if obliquely in much of our discussion above. The second needs to be considered more explicitly at this point. Israel is, in contrast to Ethiopia, a highly child- and youth-oriented country. Many of the policies implemented and programmes initiated can be attributed both consciously and unconsciously to this preference. Although officials were adamant that they did not intend to repeat past mistakes and that adults

49 Kaplan, 'Leadership . . .'; Kaplan and Rosen, 'Invention . . .'

50 Shalva Weil, 'Representations of leadership among Ethiopian Jews in Israel', *Between Africa and Zion*, 230-9.

51 Ruth Westheimer and Steven Kaplan, *Surviving Salvation: The Ethiopian Jewish Family in Transition* (New York: New York University Press 1992).

would not be treated as 'a generation of the wilderness', only in rare circumstances were programmes designed to strengthen family units or work through (rather than around) them. Even today, it is striking that while non-governmental organizations (NGOs) decry the poor economic condition of the Ethiopian community, the NGOs have invested most of their own energies and finances in school-age and even pre-school children.

Given children's intensive exposure to outside influences in school and after-school programmes and, in particular, their greater facility in learning Hebrew, it is little wonder that children have adapted faster than their parents. Often this results in a reversal of roles in which children acting as 'heads of households' represent the family in dealings with outsiders. Parents, many of whom have also lost their economic functions as providers, are left isolated, frustrated and dependent.<sup>52</sup>

In Israel Ethiopian women have been encouraged to take a greater role in family decision-making and to have more responsibility and autonomy in their dealings with the society around them. Traditional assumptions regarding menstrual purity, pre-marital behaviour and employment have been challenged. Nevertheless, as we noted in our discussion of employment, they still remain unrepresented in the work force, while government assistance to them and their children has increased their options. Girls and young women, in particular, have been presented with unprecedented choices regarding education, age of marriage and the number and timing of children. Inevitably these new choices have produced benefits, confusion and tensions. Few role models exist within the Ethiopian community for women seeking to follow new paths and many Ethiopian males resent their loss of status and control. Both pre-marital pregnancies and family violence have been reported as problems among Ethiopian immigrants. The Ethiopians' struggle to redefine their family with regard to both its internal division of labour and relationship to the outside world will probably continue well into the next generation.<sup>53</sup>

## 12 Ethiopian Jewish culture in Israel: can it survive?

The challenges posed to Ethiopian religious practice and family life by the encounter with Israeli religious authorities are part of a larger encounter between Israeli cultural traditions and those brought from Ethiopia. Many accounts of

Israeli absorption depict the 1950s as a period when Israeli absorption agencies tended to treat immigrants from North Africa as a *tabula rasa* and aggressively sought to transform them as quickly as possible into (modern, westernized) Israelis as part of a 'melting pot' philosophy of absorption. Accordingly, critics today blame many of the problems faced by such communities on the dislocation and culture shock of the prevailing paternalistic policies and practices. In an attempt to avoid repeating what are perceived as the mistakes of that period, Israeli officials charged with assisting Ethiopian immigrants spoke frequently about the need to preserve Ethiopian traditional culture. In practice, such policies of cultural preservation proved to be mainly rhetoric. Most authorities adopted a utilitarian attitude which sought to understand Ethiopian culture only in so far as this was necessary in order to formulate more successful absorption policies and programmes in Israel.<sup>54</sup>

Since their arrival in Israel sporadic attempts have been made to record for posterity the oral traditions, literature and customs of the Ethiopian Jewish community of Israel. Since Ethiopian culture was preserved in Ethiopia primarily through ritual and word of mouth the death of each elder is similar to the destruction of an entire library. Yet despite the necessity that interviews and other forms of documentation be carried out as soon as possible, only scattered attempts have been made to record this material and these have often been unsystematic and unscientific in nature.

One product of such unscientific attempts at documentation has been the popularization of highly idealized and nostalgia-tinged images in which life in Ethiopia is depicted in a static and ahistorical fashion. In these portrayals an idealized trouble-free pre-emigration existence in which there were no generational conflicts, no psychological problems, no crime and no inner communal tensions is contrasted to the trouble-plagued life in Israel. By positing a Utopian past such portrayals not only distort the historical record, but also increase the difficulties inherent in understanding the impact of resettlement on Ethiopian life.<sup>55</sup> It is not our intention to discount the phenomenon of nostalgia as such. Rather, we wish to emphasize that it is an important topic for analysis, insofar it is the nostalgia of the immigrants, and not a projection of the researchers.

Yet another attitude towards traditional culture is its 'folklorization'. This term refers to attempts to

52 Ibid., 59-78.

53 Ibid., 59-102; Eva Leitman, 'Migration and transition: three generations of Ethiopian women', *Between Africa and Zion*, 166-78.

54 Kaplan and Rosen, 'Invention ...'.

55 Dani Budowski and Yosef David, 'Ethiopian Jews' (Tel Aviv: Behalchin 1996) (in Hebrew).

present elements of Ethiopian culture including dance, folk songs, traditional foods and crafts such as pottery and weaving outside the context of their conventional social structure. Through the organization of dance troupes and arts co-operatives, small groups of Ethiopians are able to participate in the re-enactment of traditional arts and crafts. In most cases, however, the products of such groups, whether they be music, sculptures, dances or woven materials, differ markedly from what was produced in Ethiopia and often reflect the wider non-Jewish Ethiopian environment or the impact of Israeli life as much as they reproduce works done by Ethiopian Jews in Ethiopia.<sup>56</sup> In the final analysis, it is probably impossible to preserve a traditional culture in the face of rapid social change including migration, family reorganization, urbanization and entry into the modern economy. Thus, the transformation and even extinction of Beta Israel culture as practised in Ethiopia may be an inevitable price of emigration to Israel. If this is, indeed, the case then the physical survival of Ethiopian Jewry will have been paid for at the price of their cultural survival.

Although Ethiopian Jewish culture cannot be preserved in Israel, it can be documented. Unless immediate action is taken in this area, when the first generation of Israeli-born Ethiopian Jews begin to search for their roots, they will find only scattered books and unclear memories of their oral traditions, prayers, rituals and historical records.

Nowhere is the demise of Beta Israel culture clearer than in the area of spoken language. In Ethiopia most Ethiopian Jews spoke the most important 'national' language, Amharic; those from the northern provinces spoke Tigrinya. In addition to both these Semitic languages, the community recited prayers, which were primarily in Ge'ez, an ancient Semitic language which has not been a spoken tongue for several centuries, or in Agawinya, a Cushitic language known to only a few community members.<sup>57</sup> Prior to the encounter with world Jewry, the Ethiopian Jews had no working knowledge of Hebrew. Even their Bible and other holy books were in Ge'ez. Most lay community members were illiterate, although religious leaders often could read and some younger members, especially those who moved to cities, had attended school.

56 Cf., for example, Steven Kaplan and Chaim Rosen, 'Created in their own image: a comment on Beta Israel figurines', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, nos. 141-2, 1996, 171-82; Ora Shwartz-Beerli, 'The embroidered pictures of Yazazo Aklum of Tigre—their source and significance', *Between Africa and Zion*, 217-29.

57 Itzhak Grinfeld, 'The Falashas and their languages in the present and in the past—an historical-philological view', *Pe'amim*, no. 33, 1987, 50-73.

Ethiopians in Israel, like other immigrants, have been exposed on a massive scale to Hebrew, not only as a spoken language but also as a language to be written and read. Given the relatively high illiteracy of Ethiopian immigrants and their lack of familiarity with classroom situations, teaching them Hebrew presented special difficulties.<sup>58</sup> In fact, few adults mastered Hebrew and most of them remained dependent on their children or other young relatives in encounters with Israeli officials. At the same time, many young people, including those born in Israel or who arrived in the country at a young age, neither read nor write Amharic or Tigrinya, although most understand the spoken languages from their homes and speak them to some extent. Only a few programmes attempt to teach Amharic to Ethiopian youngsters. The combination of high illiteracy among immigrant adults and the intense exposure of children in Israel to Hebrew rather than Amharic means that already today more Ethiopians read and write Hebrew than Amharic. While government agencies and pro-Ethiopian organizations assiduously print informational material in Amharic they have little audience.

In contrast, surveys indicate that up to 90 per cent of the Ethiopian community listen to broadcasts on Israeli radio in Amharic or Tigrinya. These include daily news broadcasts and a variety of public service and informational programmes which make the nationwide broadcasts a major vehicle for communication throughout the Ethiopian community. In May 1997 a half-hour weekly television show, primarily in Amharic, was inaugurated. Indeed, one of the striking aspects of the survival of some aspects of Ethiopian culture in Israel is the manner in which new media—radio, video, tapes and compact disks—have become a major vehicle for traditional song, dance and stories.<sup>59</sup>

### 13 Race and racism

It is impossible to discuss the situation of Ethiopian Jews in Israel without considering whether they are the subject of racism or racial discrimination. The issue is far more complex than might be expected. One of the most unusual aspects of the

58 Shoshana Ben-Dor (ed.), *Saga of Aliyah: The Jews of Ethiopia: Aspects of their Linguistic and Educational Absorption* (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education and Culture 1990); this English volume contains a selection of articles from a longer Hebrew volume. See also Lisa Anteby, 'Silence des anciens, énigmes de l'écrit: les péripéties de l'alphabetisation des immigrants éthiopiens en Israël', *Revue Européennes des Migrations Internationales*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1996.

59 Lisa Anteby, 'Print, magic and videotapes: new patterns of orality and literacy among the Ethiopian Jews in Israel' in Harold Marcus (ed.), *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies* (Lawrenceville, N.J.: Red Sea Press 1994), 98-113.

Ethiopian immigration is that it brought immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa to a country with no resident Black African community. Moreover, they were brought not as refugees or migrant workers, but to be integrated as citizens. Expectations both among immigrants and hosts were high and in many cases unrealistically optimistic.

Prior to the arrival of the Ethiopians, 'race' in the sense of skin colour and other physical traits was not a major issue in Jewish-Israeli culture. Indeed, the terms 'race' and 'racism' were usually used only with regard to 'antisemitism' in discussing Jewish-Christian relations and particularly the Holocaust. Relations between Jews and Arabs and between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews were discussed in terms of 'discrimination' rather than racism. Moreover, the categories Jew/Arab, Jew/Christian and East European/Middle Eastern were all far more significant distinctions than black/white.

For their part, Ethiopian immigrants were confronted for the first time with a situation in which their physical appearance—most notably their skin colour—identified them as both a minority and as members of a particular ethnic group. In Ethiopia neither their physical appearance nor skin colour distinguished them from most of their neighbours. Most had had only limited contact with non-Ethiopians and few had ever lived as a racial minority. Indeed, in their indigenous colour terminology they did not view themselves as 'black' but as 'reddish-brown'. 'Black' was a designation reserved for darker, kinky-haired residents of the southern regions of Ethiopia who were generally considered by northerners, including the Beta Israel, to be racially inferior.<sup>60</sup>

Israeli absorption authorities, painfully aware of the situation of most African diaspora communities in other Western countries, sought to avoid setting in motion patterns of discrimination and segregation. Housing programmes were designed to prevent ghettoization, job programmes to avoid Ethiopians being channelled into domestic work, and university requirements adjusted to produce an educated elite as soon as possible. Indeed, affirmative action programmes in housing, education and army recruitment—the subject of much debate elsewhere—were implemented in Israel with only limited discussion. 'Affirmative action', 'reverse discrimination', 'ghettoization' are just a few of the terms borrowed by Israeli

authorities to discuss the situation of the Ethiopians. It is our contention that these terms are extremely problematic when applied in an attempt to understand the specifics of Ethiopian Jews in Israel. The limits of this report make it impossible to discuss this issue in detail.

Nevertheless, racism became a common explanation for policies or programmes that did not meet expectations. Thus, in the 1980s and 1990s delays in bringing Ethiopians to Israel were condemned as motivated by racism, as were the rabbinate's demands for special conversions (see page 15). Special absorption classes for Ethiopian students were condemned by some as segregation and attempts to exclude Ethiopians from towns with existing economic and social problems were challenged in the Israeli Supreme Court as discriminatory. Indeed, accusations of racism became the standard reaction to any unpopular policy or statement. Thus, an absorption bureaucracy which sought to advance Ethiopians' interests was often saddled with blanket accusations which depicted it as inherently anti-Ethiopian.

While it is difficult to make a case for institutionalized racism as a major factor in the Ethiopian encounter with Israeli society, racial prejudice clearly exists on a variety of levels. The Israeli tendency to ascribe to different groups unchanging predetermined 'mentalities' has led the Ethiopians to be characterized as a group with ingrained immutable attributes. While in the case of the Ethiopians such generalizations are often 'positive', i.e. quiet, polite, gentle (not so with all immigrant groups), they are inherently dangerous since they encourage stereotyping, neglect the individual and replace the complex dynamics of cross-cultural communication with an image of an inherently alien 'other'. A widespread willingness to associate a low level of technology with 'primitiveness' has also resulted in the Ethiopians being labelled by many as 'backward' and naive. Although it is difficult to substantiate claims that there is a clear pattern of racial discrimination against Ethiopians and officials usually act quickly to punish those guilty of such behaviour, many Ethiopians have little confidence in the Israeli authorities they encounter.<sup>61</sup> Thus, individual incidents become widely known throughout the community and, whatever their significance or motivation, are easily interpreted as evidence of widespread racism.

60 Hagar Salamon, 'Reflections of Ethiopian cultural patterns on the Beta Israel absorption in Israel: the "Barya" case', *Between Africa and Zion*, 126-30; Haim Rosen, 'Working as a government anthropologist among Ethiopian Jews in Israel', *Israel Social Science Research*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1995, 59-61.

61 An Ethiopian soldier who was denied access to an army infirmary was invited to meet the prime minister and the soldiers responsible were punished, *Ha'Aretz*, 1 April 1997, Bet-7. For recent examples of Ethiopians' scepticism regarding official explanations of their problems see, for example, *Ha'Aretz*, 21 August 1997, Bet-2.

Although few officials will publicly discuss the topic, special problems exist between Ethiopian and Russian immigrants.<sup>62</sup> These can be attributed, at least in part, to the tensions which resulted from placing immigrants from vastly different cultures side by side during the 1990s. Hotels and caravan sites were often the place for the first face-to-face encounters between Ethiopians and Russians. The decision of officials to devote far greater resources per immigrant to the Ethiopians inevitably produced resentment among the Russians.

In the final analysis, situations and policies not perceived by most Israelis as racist may be genuinely understood as such by Ethiopians. Some Ethiopians' hypersensitivity to racial prejudice is no more justified or realistic than some Israelis' blanket denials. Such differing interpretations are almost inevitable in a situation in which neither side has much previous experience with the specific situation and both sides are repeatedly called upon to walk the borderline between cultural sensitivity and colour-blindness. Clearly, the publicly stated goal of both Ethiopian spokespersons and Israeli officials is the successful integration of Ethiopian immigrants into the dominant Jewish population of the country. What exactly this means, how this is to be achieved, at what speed and at what price (both economically and culturally) is the subject of much debate.

While some would condemn all policies which treat Ethiopians as a group with special needs, in the short term such programmes are probably necessary and helpful. Separate absorption classes for new immigrant youth can, however, easily become segregated classes. A colour-blind policy in army entrance or in the admission of Ethiopians to higher education would doubtless lower their numbers in both frameworks. However, special treatment for all those of Ethiopian descent regardless of their needs, length of time in the country, or even country of birth, risks creating the perception of a 'right' based on national origin and fomenting the forms of backlash engendered by such programmes elsewhere in the world.

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## 14 Conclusion

Although the primary purpose of this report has been to present an up-to-date summary of the situation of Ethiopian immigrants in Israel, the implications of their experience in Israel can be fully appreciated only if they are considered

against the broader background of similar phenomena. To this end, it is useful to place the Ethiopian immigration in context by briefly comparing it to both other waves of immigration to Israel and the resettlement of recent migrants and particularly refugees in Europe. Perhaps of greatest interest, however, are the questions which arise concerning the phenomenon of migration of a group from Sub-Saharan Africa to a country with no previous experience of residents from that part of the continent.

The absorption of the Ethiopians into Israeli society marks a unique attempt to incorporate a non-white group as equal citizens with full rights as part of the dominant population in a western, predominantly white country. As such it represents an ambitious attempt to deny the significance of race (in the sense of colour) and assert the primacy of national identity-religion (specifically Judaism). Ethiopian immigrants have for the most part accepted this promise of equality in pressing their cause before the Israeli authorities. Their claims for equal treatment with regard to issues such as religious status or health policy are not, for example, voiced in the universalist language of civil or human rights, but in their right to be treated equally as Jews in the Jewish state. Their commitment to this goal has, moreover, defined the nature of their political groupings and activities in Israel (see page 16). In a manner probably unparalleled among first-generation migrants, Ethiopian Jews in Israel have organized not on the basis of past political allegiances in Ethiopia or with respect to the controversial political issues that divide that country. Rather, all their political groupings in Israel are devoted in one way or another to issues concerned with their lives in the new homeland such as housing, religious status, education and immigration.

Although in one form or another the absorption of immigrants into the country's dominant Jewish population has been the goal of successive Israeli governments with regard to all waves of immigrants, in no recent case has this demanded the investment of resources and energy required with the Ethiopians. Immigrants from the former Soviet Union, for example, are clearly distinguished by education, occupational position and cultural background not only from the Israeli Arabs and Palestinians, but also from much of Israel's veteran Jewish population. Thus, despite the fact that many have had only a limited commitment to Jewish identity and culture, their size and resources make it more probable that they will form a separate community (as opposed to ethnic group) within Israel, than that they will blur the boundaries between Jewish Israelis and the rest of the country's residents.

62 Danielle Conhaim, 'Two Cultures in Conflict: Ethiopian and Soviet Jews Living Together in Israel', August 1992, unpublished.

In the case of the Ethiopians their appearance, cultural heritage, educational attainments and occupational skills sharply distinguish them from most of Israel's other Jewish residents. While the first of these is obviously immutable, strenuous efforts have been made to 'close the gap' (in the words of absorption officials) in the other three areas and thus position the Ethiopians firmly within the boundaries of Jewish Israeli society. Housing programmes (see page 8), special education opportunities (see page 11), army service (see page 11), and even economic opportunities, all serve to separate Ethiopian immigrants from comparable non-Jewish residents of Israel. Indeed, when closures of the occupied territories have created labour shortages, the authorities have responded not by hiring replacements from the large numbers of unemployed Ethiopians but by allowing the entry of foreign workers. (On the high unemployment rates among Ethiopians see page 12.) There are over 75,000 *legal* foreign workers in Israel. The number of illegal workers is generally estimated to bring the total number of foreign workers to 150,000.<sup>63</sup>

This concerted policy of inclusion distinguishes the Ethiopians from most refugee and migrant groups in Europe and the rest of the world. Refugees are, for example, a minority in their countries of asylum.<sup>64</sup> While this is obviously true with regard to the Ethiopians' ethnic identity, it is not reflected in their national-religious status.

There are, to be sure, many elements of the Ethiopians' experience on the way to and in Israel which are reminiscent of those of other refugees. Having lived as a weak minority group in Ethiopia, their decision to migrate was motivated both by a desire to flee conditions there and to better their lives by reaching another country. Certainly, the trauma they experienced both in the Sudan and Addis Ababa and the psychological difficulties inherent in their resettlement in Israel recall the experiences of similar migrants.<sup>65</sup>

63 See, for example, Zeev Rosenhek and Eric Cohen, 'Foreign workers in Israel' in 'The International Conference on Multiculturalism and Minority Groups: From Theory to Practice' (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem 1997), 102.

64 In discussing the situation of refugees in general we have drawn heavily on Daniele Joly with Lynette Kelly and Clive Nettleton, *Refugees in Europe: The Hostile New Agenda* (London: Minority Rights Group 1997); E. F. Kunz, 'Exile and resettlement: refugee theory', *International Migration Review*, vol. 15, no. 1-2, 42-51; and 'Refugees are always a minority in their countries of asylum', Joly *et al.*, 4.

65 For more general discussion of these issues see Judith T. Shuval, 'Migration and stress' in L. Goldberger and S. Brenitz (eds.), *Handbook of Stress—Theoretical and Clinical Aspects* (New York: Free Press 1982).

Even here, however, the Ethiopians' understanding of their migration to Israel as their return from exile to the promised land is not an element found in other refugees' experience. Governmental policy towards the Ethiopians in Israel, moreover, significantly distinguishes them from most migrants or refugees. In Europe, for example, refugees are generally unwelcome arrivals for governments. Although often beneficiaries of significant government largesse, those who are granted asylum are also frequently abused, ignored or patronized.<sup>66</sup> Immigrants are usually limited to those with special skills lacking in the host country and even then they are often allowed to enter as temporary workers, rather than permanent residents.

Unlike refugees, Ethiopian immigrants entered Israel not because they were granted asylum but as part of their rights under Israel's Law of Return. The Law of Return guarantees Israeli citizenship to any Jew, including converts and non-Jews with one Jewish grandparent, who requests it. This meant that they were immediately granted citizenship and full equality under the law. They are granted housing, education, language courses, job training, etc. Indeed, one is struck by the extent to which the Ethiopians are granted rights *recommended* in the Minority Rights Report:

Recognized refugees should be entitled to the same rights as nationals regarding economic, social and cultural rights such as: subsistence, housing, education, training and employment, language, and religious practice. This should include the same rights as any national to undertake political activities . . . Refugees have special needs concerning their long-term development. Practical needs include language training, educational programmes and employment retraining. Their deeper cultural, and personal needs should be respected through support for their own languages, culture and way of life and for social, medical and psychological programmes geared to their needs.<sup>67</sup>

Moreover, as immigrants in a country founded on the principle of Jewish immigration, they were given rights not even accorded to many of the country's veteran citizens. Similarly, their entry was contingent neither on any job skills they possessed nor on other conditions that made them 'desirable'. Rather it was understood that their integration would demand a vast expenditure of resources.

There is a popular perception that, regardless of the policies implemented, the process of refugee

66 Joly *et al.*, 4.

67 *Ibid.*, 38.

or immigrant resettlement takes at least two or even three generations. If there is even a modicum of truth in this proposition then it is clearly too early to expect the Ethiopian Jewish community to be fully assimilated into Israeli society. Yet Israel is a comparatively young country, which is only just celebrating fifty years of independence. From this perspective, two or three generations is equal to, or greater than, the history of the country to date.

Viewed from the perspective of Israel's total history of immigrant absorption, the Ethiopian immigration can be said to have been accorded a significance far beyond that merited by its numbers alone. The more than 50,000 Ethiopian immigrants who have arrived to date are dwarfed, for example, by the North African immigrants of the 1950s and the immigrants from the former Soviet Union who arrived in the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, the approximately 60,000 immigrants from the Caucasian republics of the former Soviet Union form a community comparable in size to that of the Ethiopians, but have received only a small fraction of the attention.

Although it is not always easy to unravel the connection between cause and effect, several factors would appear to explain the public fascination with the Ethiopians. The dramatic airlifts which brought over half of all Ethiopian immigrants to Israel were the subject of international attention and one of the rare instances in which Israel made headlines outside the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>68</sup> The depictions of these airlifts as the rescue of an embattled lost tribe from a hostile African setting provided most Israelis and many other Jews with a powerful vindication of the Zionist state's role as a non-racist nation which serves as a refuge for Jews in distress. For American Jews in particular the arrival of the Ethiopians seemed to offer the opportunity to both purge their feelings of guilt regarding their inactivity at the time of the Holocaust and rebuild bridges to the African-American community.<sup>69</sup>

In Israel the Ethiopians served as a focus for discussion in the media and in the parliament of several of the country's most sensitive internal

dilemmas. Even before the establishment of the state of Israel, Jews from many lands (e.g. Spain, Portugal, Poland, Russia, Yemen) who differed widely from each other in stature and skin colour had lived side by side in Palestine. Intergroup tensions through the years in this immigrant society have involved ethnicity, class, veteran status in the country—but prior to Operation Moses, the issue of race had rarely, if ever, been explicitly discussed in Israel. Indeed, given heightened sensitivity to the connection between Judaism and race in the wake of the Holocaust, even to suggest a link between Jewishness and race was for years taboo. Although groups of differing complexion, on a continuum from light to dark, live together in Israel, it is only the Jews of Ethiopia who, as a group, are seen as 'black'. Thus, only with the arrival of this group did the notion of race become part of internal Jewish distinctions. Indeed, it is striking to note how common accusations of racism between different Jewish groups have become in the past decade and a half.

The Ethiopians' unique form of Judaism has also served as a catalyst for the re-examination of Israel's ongoing tensions over the issue of religious pluralism and the state. Israel seeks to be perceived as the unchallenged centre of the Jewish people throughout the world. The fact that the Orthodox rabbinate has exclusive rights to represent Judaism in the country explicitly delegitimizes other forms of Jewishness. While modern Jewish movements such as Reform (Liberal) or Conservative Judaism can be dismissed by religious and secular Israelis alike as deviations from an ideal Orthodox model, the Ethiopians were not so easily categorized. Many Israelis saw the Chief Rabbinate's demand that the Beta Israel undergo conversion as an entrenched religious hierarchy's harassment of a 'quiet' and 'naive' population. The Beta Israel depict their lack of familiarity with *Halakha*—the reason for the rabbinate's special requirements—as indicative of their pure, unspoiled Judaism.

The moral and financial support given to the Ethiopians' struggle for recognition by other groups in Israel and the Diaspora testifies to their visceral identification with them and their plight. They point to the many Jewish Israelis who (unlike the Beta Israel) do not keep basic religious commandments found in the Torah, but are accepted as Jews by the rabbinate because their descent is unquestioned. Indeed, the recent immigration from the Soviet Union has brought to Israel tens of thousands of nominal Jews and their non-Jewish relatives, but their troubles with the rabbinate only sporadically elicit strong statements of concern from the general Israeli public.

68 For a survey of coverage after 'Operation Moses' see Parfitt, *Operation Moses*, 108-15.

69 Cf. a pamphlet of February 1979 by the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, 'In a tragedy reminiscent of Europe during the Nazi occupation, a community of 28,000 Jews is silently facing extinction . . . If their plight worsens, then a second holocaust will wax unknown until it surfaces to once again shame the Jewish conscience.'

During the 1980s and 1990s the Israeli authorities dealt with a variety of challenges brought about by the arrival of tens of thousands of immigrants from Ethiopia. Health and housing problems were resolved, Hebrew lessons and school placements offered. While many of the most pressing problems were at least partially resolved, others remained. School results continue to be disappointing and the community's economic situation is nothing less than dire. Although generally healthy, Ethiopian immigrants who arrived after 1991 have a high rate of HIV infection.

Although partial solutions have been found to bridge the gap between Ethiopian Judaism and Israeli Orthodoxy, bitter tensions remain.

However good the intentions of successive Israeli governments, much remains to be done. There are, moreover, areas such as religious status, racial attitudes and social absorption in which the government can have only limited impact. As the first generation of Ethiopian Jews raised or born in Israel emerge into adulthood, they are increasingly impatient.

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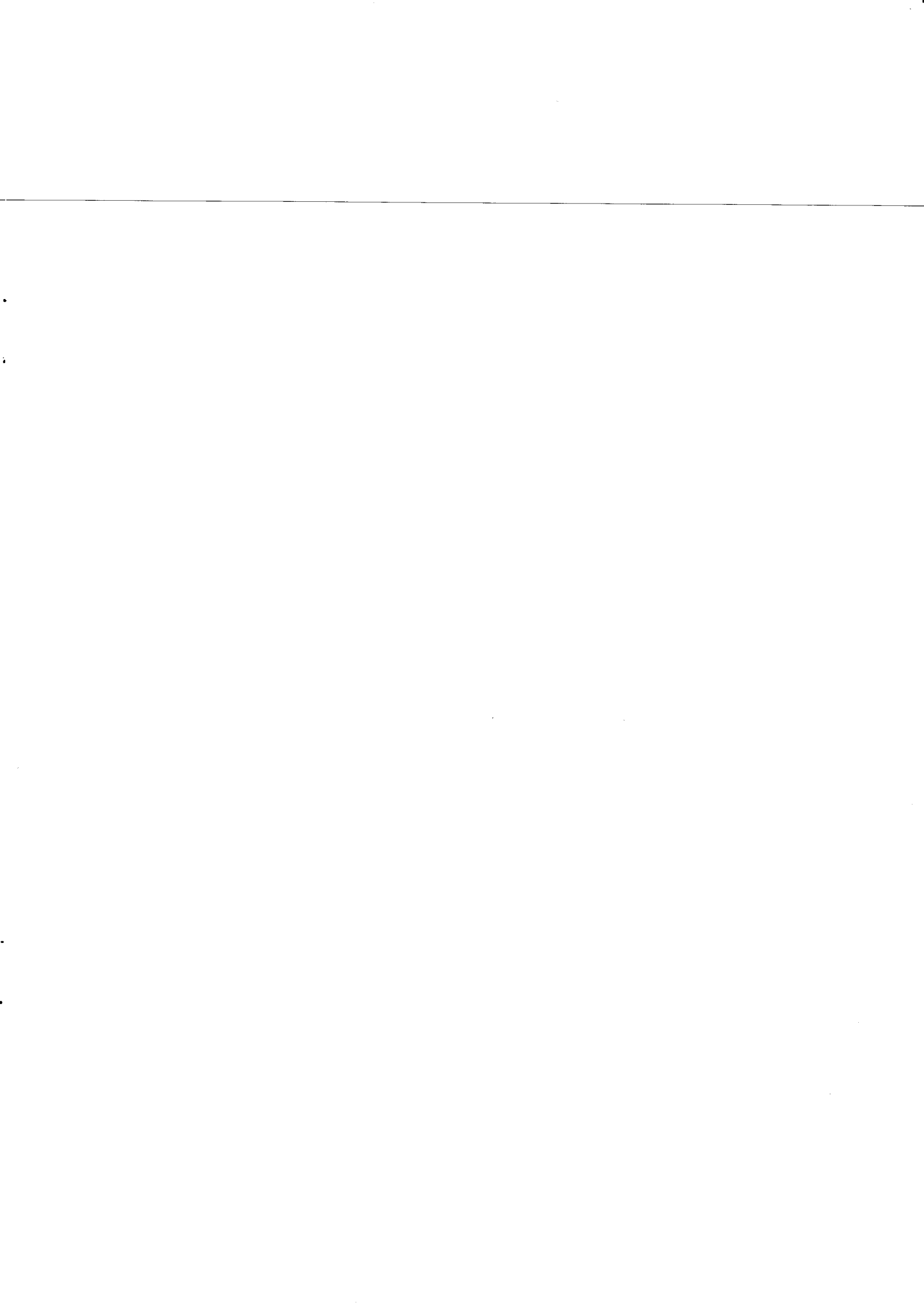
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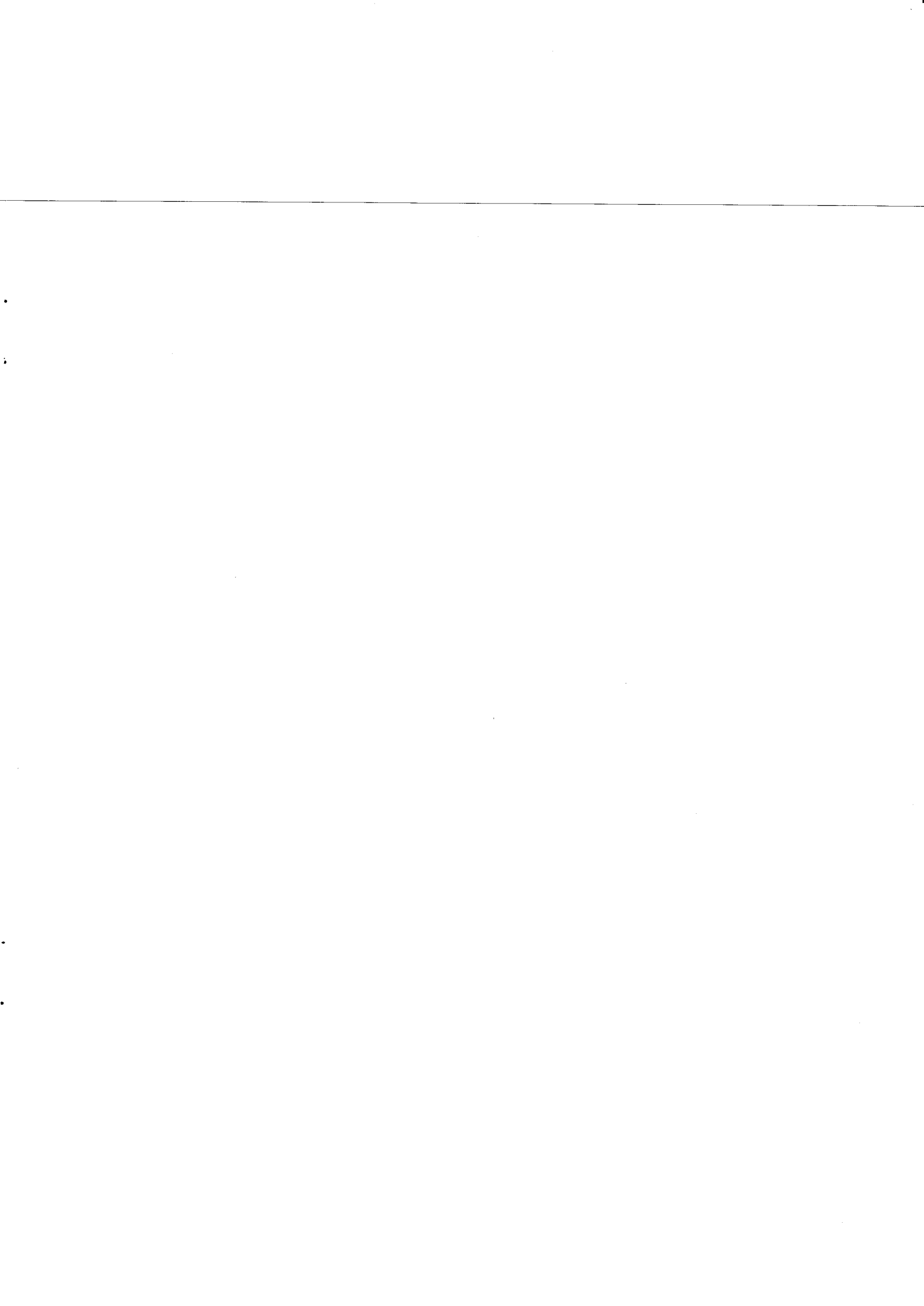
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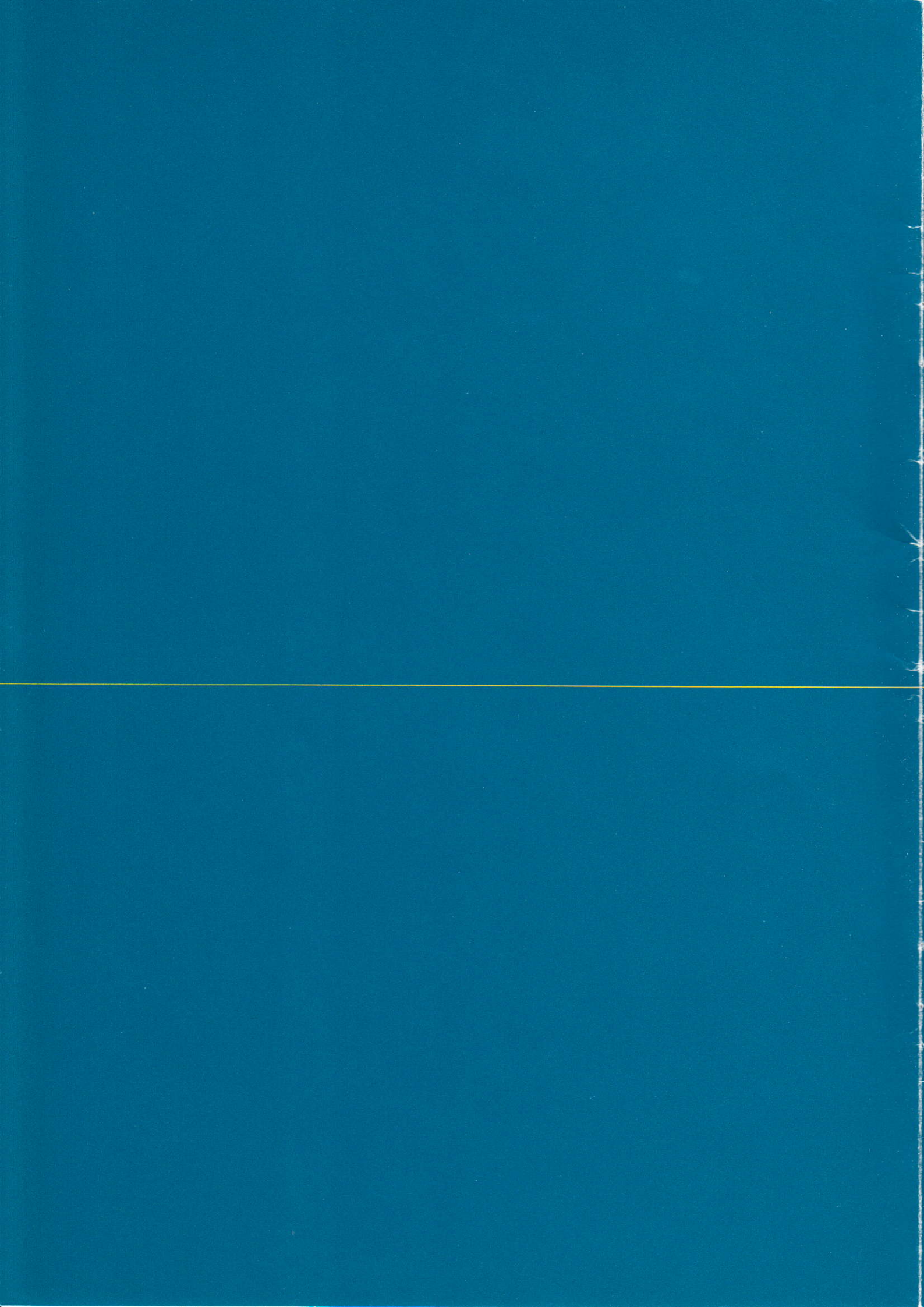
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ISSN 1363-1322 typeset in house printed by Chandlers Printers Ltd.

Institute for Jewish Policy Research and American Jewish Committee: an international partnership to enhance co-operation in research, analysis and policy-planning on issues affecting Jewish life worldwide

Published by **Institute for Jewish Policy Research** 79 Wimpole Street London W1M 7DD UK  
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