

## Are the Falas Mura Jews? A View from Tradition

Joseph Feit

In Ethiopia today there is a community that from all outward appearances seems to be a model Orthodox Jewish community. More than 4,200 children attend Jewish day schools, and thousands of adults attend daily communal prayer services and classes in Jewish education. Men put on *tefillin* and women immerse in the *mikvah*. Intermarriage is a relatively unusual phenomenon. Of those that have been able to immigrate to Israel, most continue to lead traditionally Jewish lives.

These are the Falas Mura today. However, it is reasonably clear that most Falas Mura did not lead recognizably Jewish lives until they left their villages for Addis Ababa or Gondar, a provincial capital in northern Ethiopia. Although the Falas Mura have always viewed themselves, and been viewed by their Christian neighbors, as belonging ethnically to the Beta Israel community, their parents or grandparents converted to Christianity. Their descendants now seek to return to Judaism and to rejoin the Jewish people and their relatives in Israel. (Two thirds of the Falas Mura in Addis Ababa have first degree relatives in Israel.)

To formulate a response to the community's request, it is helpful to ask what Jewish law and practice says about repentant apostates. The answer is clear and unequivocal. Even when lives were not at stake, Jewish law has traditionally welcomed repentant Jews back to the fold, including those who had converted to another faith. The late Israeli Supreme Court Justice Rabbi Simchah Asaf, appointed to the Court as an expert on Jewish Law, wrote an exhaustive monograph analyzing rabbinic responsa relating to Conversos, and concluded that apostates who wish to return to Judaism must be accepted; their reasons for rejoining the faith are irrelevant. A long line of rabbinic authority (e.g. Beit Yosef, Rashbash, but with the possible exception of the Meiri) confirms that these principles also apply to the descendants of converts. There is no basis for differentiating between

the Falas Mura and the tens of thousands of other Jews who have been reintegrated into the Jewish people over countless generations. Torah values are antithetical to racism. Thus, it is not surprising, in fact it was inevitable, that many major religious leaders have expressed strong support for Falas Mura who have adopted a halachic lifestyle.

At the time of Operation Solomon in May 1991, relying on the talmudic dictum, "A Jew even though he has sinned remains a Jew" (*Sanhedrin* 44a), both former Chief Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef (currently spiritual leader of the Sephardic religious party Shas) and Chief Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu urged Prime Minister Shamir to bring the Falas Mura to Israel. Their pleas were rejected and several thousand Falas Mura were left behind in Addis Ababa. Shortly thereafter, NACOEJ (the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry) and the Joint (the American Jewish Joint

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NACOEJ, and the UJC to  
provide maximum  
assistance to the Falas Mura  
until they are reunited with  
their families in Israel."**

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Distribution Committee) were asked by the Israeli government to provide for the community while Israel determined the fate of the Falas Mura. In response to repeated, urgent requests from the community for religious education, NACOEJ wrote to Chief Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu, inquiring whether religious instruction was appropriate. In a 1992 letter, Chief Rabbi Eliyahu responded that "it is a great *mitzvah* to educate and bring close the members of the community who are waiting for their *aliyah* from Ethiopia."

Rabbinic support for Falas Mura who wish to return to the Jewish faith is widespread. In 1993, Rabbi Dr. Aharon Lichtenstein, one of the most respected rabbis in the Religious Zionist community, was asked by the Tzaban Committee, established by the Israeli government to determine policy on the Falas Mura issue, to opine on the issue. Rabbi Lichtenstein stated:



*"Since the announced policy of the State of Israel, in accordance with the decision of Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef, is that the Beta Israel are a Jewish community, we should view the return and the aliyah of the Falas Mura as part of the process of the ingathering of exiles."*

Rabbi Lichtenstein's views, and the similar views of Rabbi Ratzon Aroosi, an equally distinguished religious advisor to the Committee, were rejected by the primarily secular committee members. It is interesting to note that a previous interministerial committee headed by then Cabinet Secretary and now Attorney General Elyakim Rubenstein, an observant Jew, recommended bringing to Israel all Falas Mura who returned to Judaism. Subsequently, Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv Haim David HaLevy specifically held that since the descendants of Ethiopian Jews who had converted fell into the lenient halachic category of *tinok ha'nishbah*, a child taken in captivity, they should be brought to Israel and returned to Judaism. Most of these authorities have required ritual immersion; the Falas Mura have willingly complied. Even when Chief Rabbi Bakshi Doron, based on information (actually misinformation furnished by opponents of the community) obligated the community to undergo the full conversion required of non-Jews, there was no opposition. Over 7,500 Falas Mura have fulfilled the requirements of Israeli rabbinical courts and possess papers from the Interior Ministry certifying them as Jews.

Neither the Joint (which provides only limited medical services to the destitute community) nor the State of Israel take into account these Jewish values and historical practices. Rather, they persist in treating the Falas Mura in Ethiopia as a Christian community with no claim on either Israeli citizenship or Jewish aid. The Joint's attitude has been subject to harsh rabbinic criticism. In November 1998, a three-judge rabbinic court — which supervised the process of returning 3,000 Falas Mura to Judaism — described the community's religious behavior in Israel in extremely favorable terms and urged people to ignore what they called the [JDC's] "slandering campaign" against the community in Israel, stating, "The real problem is only that their skin is somewhat darker." Rabbi David Shloush, Chief Rabbi of Netanya and then serving as head of the Chief Rabbinate's Committee on the Spiritual Absorption of Ethiopian Jewry, rejected the Joint's allegations that the Falas Mura did not continue to observe religious traditions after arriving in Israel. He also stated categorically that "The Falas Mura communities in Addis Ababa and

Gondar are of the seed of Israel. Their desire is to return to Judaism and keep the *mitzvot*. According to *halachah* they are Jews." The National Religious Party also strongly supports the Falas Mura's desire to make *aliyah*. Within the past twelve months, the NRP's Rabbi Yitzchak Levi, currently Minister of Housing, has twice proposed to the government that the 26,000 Falas Mura remaining in Ethiopia be brought to Israel.

Spiritual leaders of the Ethiopian community (*kessim*) have also been active advocates for the community. As far back as 1992, twelve *kessim* pleaded with the Tzaban Committee to bring the Falas Mura who had returned to Judaism to Israel. In a 1998 report, Chief Kes Hadane, the most prominent traditional spiritual leader of the Beta Israel, who had just spent a month in Ethiopia with the community stated,

*"Our brothers are our flesh and blood. They pray to the God of Israel and keep Shabbat and the Jewish festivals. They have established synagogues and have their hearts set on studying and fulfilling the mitzvot of the Torah. There is an active mikvah in Addis Ababa for fulfilling the laws of the purity of the Jewish family."*

Ethiopian Jews who have received Orthodox rabbinic ordination in Israel have expressed similar sentiments. In a November 1999 letter, six Ethiopian rabbis testified that in Israel the Falas Mura "live within the laws of Judaism and the halachic traditions. The Falas Mura are part of us and have integrated into Israeli society in a most positive manner."

Ethiopian religious leaders have a long tradition of encouraging return of the Falas Mura to the Beta Israel community. In 1966, the Chief Kes of Gondar, Uri Ben-Baruch, formed a committee for that purpose. Dr. Ephraim Isaac, an expert on Ethiopian Jews and currently a visiting professor at Princeton, notes in a report commissioned by the Joint, but curiously never distributed, that Falas Mura who return to their ancestral beliefs have always been welcomed back by the Beta Israel community.

Spiritual leaders of the main religious movements in the United States also view the community as Jewish. In October 1998, Rabbi Jerome Epstein, Executive Director of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, wrote:

*"In our view, the Beta Israel communities in Addis Ababa and Gondar clearly qualify as Jewish. There should be no significant question as to their religious authenticity. Whether Israel deems them eligible for aliyah under the Law of Return should*

*be irrelevant to an American Jewish relief organization providing humanitarian relief in the Diaspora."*

Similar views have been expressed by leading rabbinic figures in the Reform movement, including a formal opinion rendered by the Responsa Committee of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. And a recent document issued by the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America, the largest organization of American Orthodox rabbis, spoke approvingly of the Falas Mura's halachic behavior, and stated:

*"It is a Jewish imperative that the suffering of the 26,000 Beta Israel remaining in Ethiopia be brought to a swift conclusion. We call upon the State of Israel to facilitate the rapid aliyah of the entire Falas Mura community. We urge all Jewish relief organizations, particularly the Joint Distribution Committee and NACOEJ, as well as the United Jewish Communities, to provide the maximum possible physical and spiritual assistance to this distressed Diaspora community, until its members can be reunited with their brethren in Israel."*

Considering the history of welcome accorded to returnees, it is hard to understand why the State of Israel is so reluctant even to examine Falas Mura applications for *aliyah*. It is still harder to understand why the Joint refuses to provide even the minimal

level of assistance that it gave in the past (1991–1998). Finally, one must ask why the United Jewish Communities (UJC), representing the most generous Jewish community in history, one that has been so responsive to Jews and non-Jews in distress, seems indifferent to the suffering of the Beta Israel in Ethiopia. Despite years of urgent pleas by Falas Mura advocates, as of this writing, no one representing the UJC has even traveled to Ethiopia to assess the situation. Having just returned from Ethiopia, I am haunted by memories of thousands of hungry children joyfully singing songs of Zion and Jerusalem before they return to their overcrowded mud hut homes (decorated with chalk-drawn Jewish symbols) where they and their families live. I cannot understand why so few people seem to care.

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Please note: The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (the Joint) declined several invitations to contribute to this issue on the Falas Mura.

## An Historic Overview

*Ephraim Isaac*

*"We became Christians because we feared the king, not truly from our hearts..." Gadla Takla Hawaryas (15th–16th century)*

**F**alas Mura means a secret Falasi or a secret Ethiopian Jew. The word mura means "to hide, disguise, or conceal." The expression "Falas Mura" is a reference similar to those applying to the secret Jews of medieval Europe.

Between the 14th and early 16th centuries, Christianity took place in the Jewish communities of Ethiopia. Several emperors and other rulers subdued the lands occupied by the Jews and forced their conversion to Christianity. There is evidence that many of these converts practiced Judaism secretly or thought of themselves as Jews although they fully adhered to Christianity.

In the early 1600s, Emperor Susenyos prohibited the keeping of the Sabbath and suppressed all customs

believed to be Jewish. He campaigned against the Jewish leader Gideon, defeating him and his army. Susenyos subsequently devastated the Jewish communities. While a large number embraced Christianity, many remained secret Jews. It was after the end of the reign of terror by Susenyos that the Jews became a dispersed people without land or political autonomy. During the next two centuries, the Jews remained a displaced people.

In spite of the terror and tragedy, some Jews recovered, became artisans and emerged as a new economic force in Ethiopia. By the 17th century, the Jews regained a new, albeit limited, autonomy. In Quara, religious leaders like Abba Yeshaq and Abba Wadaje led a religious revival and many converts to Christianity returned to their ancestral practices of Judaism.

Both Emperor Yohannes (1868–1885) and European Christian missionaries actively sought to