

This Passover, 26,000 Ethiopians with families in Israel are languishing as they wait to make *aliyah*. What is our responsibility to these Falas Mura?

Losing Lives in Ethiopia

Micha Odenheimer

First of all, my bottom line: The Falas Mura, and with them any Jews that may be left in Ethiopia, are being discriminated against because they are poor, African, and uneducated — and because of our abiding suspicion and animosity toward Jews who converted to Christianity. Ethiopia is the only country in the world where it is impossible to apply for Israeli citizenship on the basis of the Law of Return. Instead, an Ethiopian must wait for the Israeli authorities to review his or her case after relatives in Israel submit an *aliyah* application. And even if relatives do complete the necessary forms, a Falas Mura may well starve to death while waiting, for the process itself has been cruelly and systematically delayed by an Israeli bureaucracy insensitive to human suffering and determined to keep the immigration from Ethiopia down to a slow trickle.

If I were Israel's Minister of Interior, I would immediately take the following steps: a) fire the people who have been in charge of Ethiopian immigration in the Ministry, as their behavior has sometimes bordered on criminal neglect, b) send a team of specially

appointed consuls to quickly review the cases of all those waiting for *aliyah*; some will be eligible under the Law of Return or the Law of Entry, which provides for family reunification, c) offer those families who are not eligible for *aliyah* some assistance to begin anew their lives in Ethiopia; \$1,000 per family, wisely spent, can go a long way.

Okay, now what about the murky, gray area? What about those families who don't qualify, and yet refuse to give up? What about those questions that make the Falas Mura issue one of the most frustrating, fascinating, and complex stories of the 1990s? The answers to some of these questions are clearer than ever before.

*First of all, are the Falas Mura good Jews, proud members of the Beta Israel

community, who were unfairly branded as Christian converts by evil Israeli officials? This is the version of events put forth until recently by some of the advocates for the Falas Mura, and I think we know enough by now to agree: Most Falas Mura really did practice Christianity. We are not talking about Marranos who secretly practiced Judaism, but rather about authentic

Although Jewish resistance to Christian conversion is one of the greatest acts of sustained collective courage, the Torah says: "Do not take vengeance."

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converts. At least in some Falas Mura villages, Christianity was deeply rooted. And yet, it is important to recognize the array of forces and conditions that pushed the Beta Israel families to convert. They were aggressively missionized by Westerners who offered them land, medical aid, and an education for their children if they converted. Moreover, the spiritual leadership of Ethiopian Jewry was dealt a terrible blow during the last part of the 19th century, when a majority of the key scholars and holy men died during a period of famine. Many of the Beta Israel were thus left as sheep without a shepherd — and were therefore more vulnerable to the missionaries.

Although Jewish resistance to Christianity is one of the greatest acts of sustained collective courage in human history, the Torah tells us: “Do not take vengeance” — hatred can never be given a deciding vote. And truly, returning the Falas Mura to Judaism would perhaps be the best revenge possible on the missionaries who targeted them for conversion because they were Jews.

*Why have the Falas Mura gathered in Gondar and Addis Ababa? Was it anti-Semitic pogroms that drove them from their villages? Was it irresponsible Jewish organizations that drew them to the cities with promises of support and immigration? Neither of these theories hits the nail on the head. Although there were problems with Christian villagers, the Falas Mura advocates, it seems, misread the nature, extent, and the severity of the Christian hostility. Similarly, the Israeli government and the Jewish establishment blamed the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (NACOEJ) and South Wing to Zion for causing Falas Mura to leave their villages and pour into Addis Ababa and Gondar. And yet, the dynamic that drew Falas Mura to the cities from their home villages began much earlier, when 3,000 Falas Mura came to Addis before Operation Solomon and were eventually brought to Israel. This encouraged another group of Falas Mura to camp out in Addis — and this group was eventually brought to Israel as well. Those who made it to Israel sent the message to their relatives in the villages: If you want to make it to Israel, the first step is

to leave village life and come to Addis, or later, to Gondar.

Two last, critical questions. First, are there really only 26,000 Falas Mura in Ethiopia, or, if Israel takes in this group, will the circle suddenly widen, and will another 10,000 Ethiopians uproot themselves to camp outside the Israeli Embassy? Here, I think it is of utmost importance that Diaspora Jewish leaders and Israeli politicians examine the findings of the 1999 Efrati survey, which states clearly that the Falas Mura are a closed circle. Let the professionals who supervised the survey explain exactly how they came to this conclusion. If the survey is convincing, it is of great significance. From the beginning, Israeli officials have based their

argument against further immigration on the notion that the complicated web of family relations in Ethiopian culture meant that the more Falas Mura you took in, the more would be eligible. If this is not true, then much of the anti-Falas Mura argument breaks down.

Finally, what effect will the influx of a large number of Falas Mura have on the Ethiopian Jewish community already in Israel,

those who sacrificed so much to remain Jews? Will it weaken Ethiopian Jewish identity, corrode the sense of solidarity between Ethiopian Jews and other Jewish Israelis already challenged by poverty and alienation? Will some Falas Mura — perhaps a significant number — revert to Christianity once in Israel? These are concerns I hear voiced by some members of the Beta Israel community in Israel; there are not yet any answers. What is clear is that any decision to bring another 26,000 Falas Mura into Israel should be done in coordination with the Beta Israel leadership and grassroots community. It is those Ethiopian immigrants already here who will bear much of the brunt of integrating the Falas Mura into Ethiopian-Israeli society. Even more crucial: such a decision must be accompanied by a redoubled commitment to help the entire community move beyond the poverty and marginalization into which they have been thrust. The roots of renewal, empowerment and success are already present in the generation of students,

Any decision to bring another 26,000 Falas Mura into Israel should be done in coordination with the Beta Israel community.

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

Micha Odenheimer is a writer, rabbi, and activist

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

Meeting Communal Responsibility

Yuli Tamir

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

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

1. 19th-century European missionaries proselytized Jews by erecting schools, providing medical aid, welfare support, and religious experiences.

2. Political pressure was applied to communities with "foreign" beliefs (such as the Jews, Moslems, and Kamantim) during the rule of Emperor Johannes (1869–1889).

3. Because in the 11th century Ethiopian Jews did not have the same land ownership rights as Christians, many converted in order to attain economic and social equality.

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

Living Words

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

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"Gather Our Dispersed from the Four Corners of the Earth"

Avraham Neguise

Gebyanesh Zemene Alemu was waiting in Addis Ababa with her three children since 1997, clinging to the hope of making *aliyah*, immigrating to Israel. Her married brother and sister and their families were also there. A woman in her thirties, Gebyanesh had her whole future to look forward to if only she and her children could join her parents and unmarried siblings living in Netanya (they had immigrated in 1995). But Gebyanesh's application to immigrate was never processed despite constant inquiries from her father. She died last August. Her three children are still in Ethiopia, cared for by the sister.

Tewabech Yehwalesht Dessie was in her sixties in 1997 when she left her village for Addis Ababa along with seven of her married children and their families. She already had one married son living in Beersheva. All of her brothers and sisters also lived in Israel. Her elderly mother had immigrated in 1993. Not long after her mother had arrived, family members in Israel submitted an application to the Ministry of Interior's office in Jerusalem for Tewabech to make *aliyah*. On it they clearly stated that she was in poor health and needed medical treatment unavailable in Ethiopia. Years passed with no response. Finally, in 1999 processing began and in November, Tewabech and her children were invited to the Israeli Embassy in Addis for an interview. The necessary forms were completed and sent to Jerusalem. A second interview was required and additional forms completed. While awaiting a response, Tewabech died. Three days later, a fax arrived granting her permission to immigrate. Two weeks after burying their mother in Ethiopia, all seven of her children and their families made *aliyah*.

Both women had the right to immigrate under the provisions of the Israeli Law of Return.

Like hundreds of others, these women are the tragic victims of the unjust Israeli governmental policies imposed on the remaining Beta Israel (the so-called Falas Mura) in Ethiopia. For instance, it is impossible for a Beta Israel in

Ethiopia to apply for *aliyah* — all applications must be submitted by relatives already in Israel. Once the forms are received, those in Ethiopia must wait, sometimes years, to be invited for an interview. If they are lucky, there is a consul from the Ministry of the Interior working in Ethiopia who can meet with them. To make matters worse, American Jewish relief organizations are discouraged from providing assistance to the Falas Mura who have left their villages and gathered in Addis Ababa and Gondar.

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process.**

There are still 26,000 Beta Israel in Ethiopia, 18,000 of whom are in Addis and Gondar living as refugees in their own country, struggling to survive on the less than adequate humanitarian relief they receive. The rest are still in their villages. It is not the minimal food and medical care that draws the people to Addis and Gondar; conditions are clearly better in the villages. It is the location of the Israeli Embassy in Addis and

the Israeli consulate in Gondar, the only sites where interviews for *aliyah* are possible.

The future of the last remnants of the Ethiopian Jewish community hangs in a cruel limbo. The people are needlessly suffering and dying as the Israeli government drags its feet on the *aliyah* process. Right now, we are at a critical historic crossroad: Will the rescue of the Beta Israel end as a bitter tragedy or as a triumphant victory for all the Jewish people?

May the One who performed miracles for our ancestors and redeemed them from slavery to freedom, redeem us soon and gather our dispersed from the four corners of the earth; united in fellowship is all of Israel. *Blessing for Rosh Chodesh*

Avraham Neguise is a professional social worker and Director of South Wing to Zion, a Jerusalem-based nonprofit organization created and managed by Ethiopian Jews. Born in Gondar, Ethiopia in 1958, Neguise made aliyah in 1985.



The Ethiopian Diaspora

Shlomo Mula

The Ethiopian Diaspora was virtually unknown until approximately 100 years ago. Ethiopian Jews did not know that there were Jews with white skin. They thought of themselves as Jews keeping the commandments of the nation of Israel. This Diaspora maintains characteristics unique to this community in distinction from other Diasporas.

It is true that Ethiopian Jews suffered greatly from anti-Semitism and oppression. They could not be landowners, and they did not have the right to vote. For generations, they could not be elected to offices of the central government in the Ethiopian kingdom.

Nonetheless, the Jews of Ethiopia guarded their religious heritage with utmost devotion and remained Jewish over the generations. They were willing to sacrifice their lives in order to keep their religious practices and return to the land of Israel.

Within the last 150 years, a group of Jews decided, of its own free will, to convert to Christianity. These people are known today as the Falas Mura. They mocked the Jews, they denounced them, and some of them even robbed Jews who were on their way to the land of Israel.

At the point that the Jews decided to walk to the Sudan from the Gondar and Tigray regions in the hope of going to the Holy Land, the Falas Mura did not even consider this an option. On the contrary, not only did they not go, but they robbed the Jews who were making their way on foot to the Sudan.

The year 1990 brought a turning point in the desire of the Falas Mura to immigrate to Israel. Some of them even joined Jews in Addis Ababa, and a year later tried to make *aliyah*. The State of Israel refused to accept them, and rightly so, because their true identity was unclear.

What happened subsequently was that a handful of activists, agitating on behalf of the Falas Mura, succeeded in forcing the State of Israel to accept them. For the first time in its history, the State broke its Law of Return and brought immigrants into the country on the basis of entrance laws and gave them immigrant rights.

The question that necessarily arises from all this

is: Should the State of Israel change its laws out of fear that it be accused of racism or should it remain steadfast in the face of differing international opinions and invest in the Jews of Israel? I would choose the latter.

In Jewish law, the following question is asked: Does a Jew who has sinned still remain a Jew? While this is a very important question and challenge, any self-respecting state must base its decision on common sense. The state must not, indeed it is improper to, make a decision based on transient political pressures because of concerns that its decision be perceived as racist or discriminatory.

At the moment, the problem of the Falas Mura is far from solved. I believe that many people who are unfamiliar with the facts are trying to advocate on behalf of the Falas Mura and even resort to bold-faced lies in order to change Israeli law.

The State of Israel and the Jewish people must arrive at a consensus and decide to undertake the appropriate investigations to determine who has the right to benefit from the Law of Return. It must tell those who are waiting that they are not eligible to come to Israel under the Law of Return. Their problem must be solved in Ethiopia, and the State of Israel and the Jewish people have no responsibility toward them.

I have no doubt at all that the State of Israel and the Jewish people are prepared to unite eligible families, but Israel cannot afford to be open to any refugee who wants to come here. Furthermore, Israeli society is fragmented, even splintered, and it would not do to add oil to this fire.

Nonetheless, should the State of Israel fail to expedite the *aliyah* of those who are eligible under the Law of Return, it will have betrayed the Zionist ideal of its founders.

Shlomo Mula is Chairman of the Movement for the Advancement of Ethiopian Immigrants. In the past, he was in charge of Ethiopian immigrant affairs at the Absorption Ministry. He is a member of the political party Yisrael Ba-aliyah and was a candidate for the Knesset in the last elections. Translated from the Hebrew by Susann Codish.

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

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

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.

A graduate of Yale Law School, Joseph Feit is a past president of NACOEJ. He has met numerous times with American, Ethiopian, and Israeli leaders to discuss the situation of the Beta Israel in Ethiopia.

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)

Falas 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



convert Ethiopian Jews. Many modern Falas Mura are likely descendants of these converts. Ethiopian Jews held a great appeal to European Christian missionaries who believed that if they succeeded in converting Ethiopian Jews, all of Africa would convert to Christianity.

Knowledge about the Jews in Ethiopia was first brought to Europe by the Portuguese in the 16th century. However, it was not until the publication of reports by the Scottish traveler James Bruce, beginning in the early 19th century, that Protestant missionaries became interested in Ethiopian Jews. The Ethiopian government and Church permitted Henry Aaron Stern, a converted German Jew, and Martin Flad to pursue their missionary work among the Jews.

Many Jews resisted conversion, but missionary use of financial rewards, especially during famine, could have been a powerful inducement. The Jewish leadership tried all means—including petitioning the government and other legal avenues—to resist missionary activities. Despite efforts by the western Christian missionaries, Beta Israel diaries report that the number of converts in the 19th century only numbered a few hundred.

Ironically, it was in reaction to the vigorous Christian missionary activities that the Jewish Diaspora first took interest in Ethiopian Jewry. In 1954, the Jewish Agency Department of Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora established a Rabbinic Seminary in Asmara and sent two dozen Ethiopian Jewish students

to Israel. Thirty-three village schools were opened. One of the objectives of these schools was to encourage Christianized Ethiopian Jews, or Falas Mura, to return to their Jewish roots. Unfortunately, after two years all schools except one were closed—presumably due to lack of funds.

The Falas Mura in Ethiopia today represent a distinct group. According to the best available information they are estimated to be approximately 20,000. They generally keep to their own villages and do not intermarry. They identify themselves as Jews and are identified by their neighbors as Jews. Moreover, they keep traditional Ethiopian Jewish practices. The phenomenon of converted Jews returning to Judaism, welcomed and recognized by the Jewish community, such as Conversos, is known throughout history in the Jewish world. Likewise in Ethiopia, the Falas Mura who return to their ancestral faith have in the past been and should still be today welcomed back and fully integrated into the community.

Born in Ethiopia, Ephraim Isaac is currently the Director of the Institute of Semitic Studies at Princeton University. He earned his doctorate at Harvard University and was the first professor Harvard hired in Afro-American Studies. Dr. Isaac has authored numerous books and articles and initiated the National Literacy Campaign in Ethiopia.

A Jewish Agency Response

Mike Rosenberg

After graduating from Johns Hopkins University in 1971, I made *aliyah* to Israel and made my home at Kibbutz Ma'ale Hachamisha where I became, and still am, a member. I have always been active in various Jewish and Zionist affairs—in the USA as an emissary, in my own kibbutz, the United Kibbutz Movement, and within the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI).

Since 1997 I have been the Director-General of JAFI's Immigration and Absorption Department and directly responsible for all of the activities of the Jewish Agency in these areas, both in Israel and around the world.

One of my primary concerns and aims is the

rescue and successful absorption of all Ethiopians eligible under the Law of Return. While I agree that the problems of Ethiopian absorption must be on the agenda of the entire Jewish people, and that Israel should have the moral and financial support of Jewish communities to meet this challenge, the issue is not a question of who will pay for absorption, but rather a question of eligibility under the Law of Return. I believe that any individual that is eligible under the Law of Return, whether from Ethiopia or any other place in the world, should be brought home to Israel if he or she so desires.

The Falas Mura are descendants of Jews who were converted to Christianity at the end of the 19th

century. Eligibility for immigration under Israel's Law of Return excludes individuals who have converted out of Judaism.

The Israeli government established a special committee, headed by the then-Minister of Absorption Mr. Yair Tzaban, to investigate the cause of the Falas Mura. The Recommendations of the Committee, which were published in January 1993, indicated that even though it was almost certain that the Falas Mura are not Jews today, they should be brought to Israel as part of a special humanitarian campaign that is based not on the Law of Return, but rather on reuniting families in the framework of the Law of Entry (a regular Israeli immigration law).

Within this framework, any Jewish immigrant was entitled to bring first-degree relatives who were left in Ethiopia to Israel if the relative was:

1. an unmarried child
2. a parent of a minor or single person
3. a spouse whose wife or husband was already in Israel
4. a humanitarian case that did not fall into any of the above categories

By 1997, some 5,200 Ethiopian immigrants had arrived in Israel under the Tzaban Committee's decision to reunite families. A 1997 decision (based on the Law of Entry) approved immigration of Falas Mura on the condition that they were from "the seed of Israel." After that, however, the criteria for immigration would solely follow the criteria of the Law of Return.

Most of the residents of the Addis Ababa compound were in fact brought to Israel by July 1998, but the flow of immigrants to the Addis compound did not stop. People continued to flock to Addis and to Gondar in the hope that they would be brought to Israel, a hope that was fed by the very fact that Jewish

organizations continued to provide support services for them, in violation of previous agreements to curtail activities in Ethiopia and focus efforts on absorption in Israel.

According to reports from the field, there are now thousands of Falas Mura in Addis Ababa, and the Gondar area. Most of these people are not eligible to come to Israel under the Law of Return, and any change in the current policy would no doubt lead to greater numbers requesting to immigrate to Israel from Ethiopia.

Since 1994, responsibility for determining eligibility for immigration has become the sole responsibility of Israel's Ministry of the Interior, specifically an official representative of this Ministry in Ethiopia. The Jewish Agency, on the other hand, is responsible for making preparations for immigration and arranging flights for those whose eligibility has been established and approved.

The decision regarding immigration of Falas Mura according to the Law of Entry, however, is subject to the exclusive authority of the Israeli government. The current position of the Jewish Agency is that the criteria for immigration from Ethiopia will be the Law of Return, as is the case for the rest of the world.

It is critical to distinguish between the issue of the Falas Mura and the absorption of those that have already been brought to Israel, which remains a central challenge to the Jewish people and one that we should all address.

Mike Rosenberg is Director General of the Department of Immigration and Absorption of the Jewish Agency for Israel, responsible for all activities of the Jewish Agency in these areas, both in Israel and throughout the Diaspora (including Ethiopia).

UJC and the Falas Mura

Stephen D. Solender

Recently, the leadership of United Jewish Communities (UJC) had very intensive and productive discussions with ministers and other officials in the Israeli government regarding the Falas Mura situation. We urged that the Israeli government accelerate the processing of the Falas Mura in Addis Ababa to determine, as quickly as possible, who among them is Jewish and would, consequently, be qualified to be admitted

to Israel.

During our briefings, we came to appreciate the complexity of the situation. We understand that it is a very sensitive matter. UJC will continue to maintain close contact with Israeli officials. Natan Sharansky, the Minister of the Interior, has agreed to schedule regular briefing calls with the UJC leadership so that we can follow this matter closely



and assist the Israelis in resolving it as soon as possible.

We continue to believe that the primary responsibility for financing the absorption should be that of the Israeli government. However, as has been the case in past rescue efforts, we are prepared to

participate significantly, as partners, in financing the rescue and the initial absorption. We are not in the position to finance the long-term absorption.

Stephen D. Solender is President and CEO of UJC.

Sh'ma Book Review

Black Zion: African American Religious Encounters with Judaism

Edited by Yvonne Chireau and Nathaniel Deutsch (Oxford University Press, 2000, pp 241, \$17.95)

Perhaps it is less than scientific, but I have an acid test for evaluating new titles in American Judaica: Books that include "African-American Jews" in their indexes go into the keeper pile. Those that do not are scoured for the inevitable mention of Louis Farrakhan, after which I make a mental note to someday inform Alan Dershowitz, Sylvia Barack Fishman, or whomever that their works would be far more credible if they referenced the 200,000-odd Black Jews in America before worrying about a tenth as many members of the Nation of Islam.

Black Zion: African American Religious Encounters with Judaism passes the index test. But immodesty allowed, I was surprised to discover my own name missing from it, along with those of my fellow co-founders of the Alliance of Black Jews, despite widespread media attention since the group's formation five years ago. I was doubly shocked to find myself nonetheless liberally quoted, as well as pictured, in an essay by Bernard Wolfson entitled, "African American Jews: Dispelling Myths, Bridging the Divide."

Unfortunately, Wolfson dispels those myths poorly. A onetime *Boston Herald* colleague, Wolfson covered the Alliance's founding as a freelance reporter but recounts that event with gross misstatements of fact and deed. Among transgressions is a description of the Chicago congregation of Rabbi Capers Funnye, an Alliance co-founder, as partaking in "lots of cornbread" during the "seven [sic] days of Passover." Funnye calls the cornbread pure fiction; the "seven days" is a Wolfson invention displaying his ignorance of basic Judaism. Similarly, Wolfson misquotes an off-the-record remark by me that I keep kosher with "an inexplicable exception for clams" — an exception I do make, but with very clear reasons that I could not possibly have termed "inexplicable."

Culinary mistakes may be remedied with a grain of

salt. But they are troubling when used in passages that question our commitment to Judaism. To that, Wolfson adds even more fantastic claims, including that Alliance members "believed white Ashkenazi Jews in the United States were fundamentally racist" — a charge totally unsubstantiated by quotes real or imagined.

To the uninitiated, the essay will read as a charming depiction of warm and furry zoo specimens, a tone consistent in chapters analyzing the Black Hebrew community of Dimona, Israel, and Jewish iconography in Haitian Vodouism. Exceptions are in Deutsch's essay on Judaic influences on the Nation of Islam and Susannah Heschel's study of theological similarities between her father, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Martin Luther King Jr. But while the latter two works may deserve note, the whole is tainted by Chireau's admission that fact-checking was delegated to the contributors. In his errors, Wolfson proved that standard virtually nonexistent.

To be clear, Chireau (who is black and not Jewish) and Deutsch (Jewish and not black) maintain their volume is not specifically about Black Jews, but an analysis of Judaism's influence on African-American religiosity. In that regard, Black Jews were not eagerly sought out as contributors, Chireau said, to avoid "confessional" rather than academic writing. That's regretful. Aside from the fact that there are some pretty good Black Jewish writers — from Walter Mosely to James McBride to Julius Lester — we clearly would have been less likely to err on the tenets of our own religion and culture.

At the least, we'd make sure our names were indexed.

Robin Washington is a columnist for the Boston Herald.



As I entered the metal gate of the Jewish compound in Addis Ababa, I forgot to kiss the *mezuzah*, a symbol of God's protection. Unlike the lamb's blood on the Israelite doorpost, this *mezuzah* does not ward off the angel of death. I stood aside as streams of girls and *kipah*-clad boys passed through, each one touching the *mezuzah* and bringing their small, dry fingers to their lips. Once in the makeshift classrooms, they repeated the teacher's Hebrew sentences in perfect unison. When lunch was brought they recited *HaMotzi*, the Hebrew blessing, before easing their hunger.

Later, while helping distribute food to these children with distended bellies, I realized with a shock that I was quietly singing the penultimate line of Grace after Meals. "I have never seen a righteous Jew go hungry or his offspring beg for food."

Rabbi Waldman is right: the Falas Mura, despite past sins, are still Jews. We who sin by abandoning them are also still Jews — with the same option of repentance our Ethiopian brethren have taken. But for the moment, righteous go hungry and we sinners eat our fill.

Rabbi Susan Silverman visited the Jewish Compound in Addis Ababa in October 1999. She is the co-author of Jewish Family & Life: Traditions, Holidays and Values for Today's Parents and Children (Golden Books).

Rabbi Waldman's pertinent comments draw the attention of all caring Jews, especially those who worked in Ethiopia and Sudan in the years prior to the major airlifts.

When the Exodus of Ethiopian Jews began in 1990 from the outlying areas in Ethiopia to Addis Ababa, the volunteers, those working for the AAEJ, were

extremely thorough in their evaluation of who was and who was not Jewish, and for whom there were questions. The Ethiopians who were believed not to be Jewish were told to return to their villages. Most did not. Those for whom there were questions were referred to the Joint, the Jewish Agency, or the Israeli government. In fact, many Ethiopians who were questionable did arrive in Israel and a number of them quickly reidentified with Christianity.

The Falas Mura is an issue that is even more complicated than the issue of Russian Jewry. Because of a lack of documentation and any ability to validate historical records, it is impossible to know who qualifies and who does not under Rabbi Waldman's reference to the talmudic passage. Therefore, a very careful process has begun whereby the Joint has asked for all of the people who wish to come to Israel under the Law of Return to go to their villages and resubmit applications under the proper procedures so that they may join their Jewish brethren in Israel. In some cases, this may mean conversion; in some cases it may not. But the prospect of trying to deal with as many as 100,000 or more Ethiopians as qualified immigrants to the State of Israel without interviews and viewing proper documentation would hurt the status of the Ethiopian community in Israel.

Nate Shapiro was the President of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews from 1982 to 1993. He is currently President of F. F. Investments, an investment banking firm in Chicago.

It is clear from the words of the Talmud that "a Jew, despite having sinned, is still a Jew." This implies that a person's Jewish lineage does not change and I agree, in theory, with Rabbi Waldman's argument on this point. I must differ with him, however, on other points found in his commentary. I believe that it is wrong for the State of Israel to accept Jews from Russia, or the Falas Mura from Ethiopia, as Jews without requiring them to ritually immerse in the *mikvah*.

In both cases these Jews from the Diaspora strayed from Torah, and I believe that a reaffirmation of faith is necessary. Although the Children of Israel were borne of the sons of Jacob before they received the Torah, the Torah states that they had to wash their clothes, thereby implying that they also immersed themselves in a *mikvah* before receiving the Torah.

I agree with Rabbi Waldman that the State of Israel should not distinguish between a Jew from Russia and a Jew from Ethiopia. The need for a single standard is necessary to maintain the ideal of Jewish peoplehood.

Rabbi Capers C. Funnye, Jr. is rabbi and spiritual leader of Beth Shalom B'nai Zaken Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation in Chicago.

ישראל אף על פי שחטא ישראל הוא

סנהדרין מד:א

A Jew, despite having sinned, remains a Jew.
Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin, 42a

These words of the Sages are a fundamental principle of *halachah*, Jewish law. A Jew is someone who was born into the family of the Jewish nation. This is an irrevocable, biological fact. One's Jewish identity cannot be changed, just as one cannot change one's mother, son, or brother. One does not abandon one's mother, son, or brother, and your children remain your children (*Kiddushin* 36a).

These days, when people from far-flung Diasporas, primarily the Former Soviet Union and Ethiopia, gather in the State of Israel, the words of our Sages have a practical meaning.

Jews from Russia, whose ancestors strayed and cleaved to communism and atheism, are accepted back into the fold of the Jewish people. The people of the Falas Mura, whose ancestors converted to Christianity, are seeking to make *aliyah* to Israel. However, help from the international Jewish community has barely been extended. The gates of *aliyah* are still locked before them.

Does the law that states "a Jew, despite having sinned, is still a Jew," and infers that it is possible to repent and live again as a whole Jew, apply only to Russian or American Jews and not to our people in Ethiopia?

We test, over and over again, how Jewish the Ethiopian Jews and the Falas Mura really are. However, this is also a test of the Jewish people and the State of Israel: How Jewish are we in our behavior toward our Ethiopian brethren?

In 1992 Rabbi Menachem Waldman, as representative of the Chief Rabbinate, headed the Israeli government's task force in Ethiopia reporting on the Falas Mura and subsequently served as one of three members of the Chief Rabbinate's Committee on the Spiritual Absorption of Ethiopian Jews. Currently head of Machon Shevut Am, he has published five books on the subject of Ethiopian Jewry.

*NiSh'ma is the Hebrew word for "let us hear."



21st Century Judaism

In Search of Their Place

D'vora Greisman

My connection to the Ethiopian community began almost 20 years ago in Toronto, when I came across a moving photography exhibit of Ethiopian Jews living in Gondar, Ethiopia. The exhibit inspired me to volunteer — first, working and advocating in Canada for this community, then visiting Ethiopia and eventually, in Israel, working together with Ethiopian Jews to define and strategize political and social goals.

In 20 years, the picture has changed considerably. During a recent visit to my daughter's second grade class in Jerusalem to share stories of my trip to Ethiopia, I was delighted when her Ethiopian friends excitedly grabbed my pictures and started telling their own stories. They were the stars of the class that day and the other students listened in awe about a faraway place. Some of these students were in Addis Ababa last year, but this year they are creating Chanukah symbols on their computers in Israel.

What will the picture look like 10 years from now? This will depend on the role models these children encounter along with the roles their parents play in their lives. Today, many of their mentors are still native Israelis. But as the absorption process continues to evolve, the earlier role models are being replaced by young leaders from the Ethiopian community itself, who are themselves becoming parents with sabra children. Projects initiated to empower young Ethiopian leaders 10 years ago are today on the verge of succeeding. While many of the Ethiopians who arrived in Israel in the 1980s have completed their army service, fewer have university degrees.

Shula Mola, who arrived in Israel at 12 years old, traumatized by a long trek through Ethiopia and Sudan, refugee camps, sickness and death, is now my respected colleague, a mother, and a community leader. She is completing her Masters' degree in Education at Hebrew University. She, like other young Ethiopian leaders who speak Amharic and Hebrew, are faced with an enormous challenge. Many of the youth in the community are deeply troubled. At the Tel Aviv bus station, for example, over 250 Ethiopian youth turn up most Fridays before Shabbat. The bus station is the neutral, central meeting place for many hopeless and anxious Ethiopian kids making last

minute plans for the weekend. Drugs and alcohol have become more prevalent as have incidents with the police.

Many Ethiopian parents of the older generation have lost their self-confidence and authority within the family and society. Shula believes that empowering the parents is critical to the stability of the family and social structure. Government ministries and private foundations need to target programs and budgets for both the parents and the young leaders skilled to work with them.

Young Ethiopian leaders need to be nurtured. To promote this, the following initiatives need to be implemented:

1. Only the most experienced and skilled teachers should be assigned to teach the additional already-budgeted hours for Ethiopian students.

2. A detailed curriculum on Ethiopian Jewry should be established by the Ministry of Education and made compulsory for all elementary and high school classes. The material should focus on the history, culture, *aliyah*, art, music, and language unique to the Ethiopian Jewish world, and prepared jointly by Ethiopian and native Israeli educators.

3. Schools with a certain percentage of Ethiopian students should have an Ethiopian "megasher," guidance counselor, to help the school meet the Ethiopian students' unique needs and encourage more Ethiopian students to aspire toward an academic track.

4. Entrance standards at universities should be adjusted for 10 years, to allow more Ethiopian students to attend.

5. Cities with a high percentage of Ethiopians should budget for skilled Ethiopian community workers to meet weekly with targeted groups of parents. Together, they would explore and suggest avenues for dealing with critical problems distressing the Ethiopian community. These parents would then be responsible for raising consciousness, as well as empowering and sharing information with other Ethiopian parents. Parents could thereby deal more effectively with their children, rather than necessitating institutional intervention.

Ethiopian leadership in government decision-

making remains absent. Only when Ethiopians acquire more power within the political process will greater strides result. Jewish leaders worldwide must continue, *over the long term*, to strengthen and support the developing process of this unique Jewish community.

D'vora Greisman is a board member of the Israel Association for Ethiopian Jews (IAEJ) www.ahava.com/iaej. She is currently Development & Advocacy Director for Eden 2000, a social-cultural center for native Israelis and olim in their 20s & 30s, www.eden2000.org.il.

A Falas Mura Guide for the Perplexed

Barbara Ribakove Gordon

The Falas Mura dilemma is extraordinarily complex, raising questions that fall into religious, legal, social, economic, and Zionist arenas. I will briefly indicate some of the most important questions to consider in this issue of *Sh'ma*, and comment on a few of the arguments. It is appropriate for me to say at once that I am not an unbiased observer but rather an active participant in the effort to sustain the community in Ethiopia and to persuade Israeli officials to speed up their lethally slow examination of Falas Mura claims for *aliyah*.

Are the Falas Mura Jews? Yes, according to religious law, *halachah*, as interpreted by some prominent Orthodox rabbis in Israel and North America, as well as by leaders of the Conservative and Reform movements in the U.S. (see Joseph Feit's article). **Are they thus eligible to make *aliyah* at once?** No, because the Law of Return excludes anyone who converted out of Judaism (see Mike Rosenberg's article). **Is that the end of the matter?** No, because under the Return to Judaism program — designed by a committee of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate — thousands have formally converted back to Judaism. In any event, the Law of Return admits a Jew's non-Jewish spouse, children or grandchildren, making thousands of Falas Mura eligible, as are thousands of immigrants from the Former Soviet Union (see Micha Odenheimer, Yuli Tamir, Joseph Feit).

Eligibility and Jewish status aside, should the Falas Mura be considered shameless opportunists who converted out of Judaism only to get a better life and now want to return only to better themselves again? Yes, according to Shlomo Mula. No, according to Ephraim Isaac, who delineates the extreme pressure affecting conversion and states that many Ethiopian Conversos remained secret Jews, a contention not

accepted by Odenheimer. Feit holds that many Falas Mura did not lead "recognizably Jewish lives" in the past but that this is irrelevant to their return as longstanding Jewish tradition welcomes returnees to the fold unconditionally: "Israel who sins is still Israel."

Why is Israel so slow in processing Falas Mura claims? Odenheimer alone offers an explanation: "because they are poor, African, and uneducated — and because of our abiding suspicion and animosity toward Jews who converted to Christianity." Avraham Neguise provides painful examples of eligible Falas Mura who did not survive the long wait. Yuli Tamir, Israel's Minister of Absorption, demands action by the Ministry of the Interior.

What is the responsibility of Diaspora Jews to the sufferings of the Falas Mura in Ethiopia? None at all, says Mula. Neguise blames the low level of American charity on "discouragement" by the government of Israel. Tamir, who in other media has stated that Israel's ability to absorb Ethiopians is so limited that more should not come unless American Jews agree to pick up the tab (a proposal Stephen Solender rejects), does not mention this issue in *Sh'ma*. Rather, she speaks movingly of the horrors the community undergoes in Addis Ababa and Gondar. Feit says that considering the welcome historically offered to returnees, it is hard to understand why the Joint "refuses to provide even the minimal level of assistance that they gave in the past" and questions the "indifference" of the UJC.

Now, a few comments: Shlomo Mula's diatribe against anonymous Falas Mura who supposedly "mocked ... denounced ... and robbed" Ethiopian Jews during their exodus through Sudan is hard to substantiate as he offers no names, dates, locations, or

other evidence. But even if such incidents did take place, guilt cannot be assigned to an entire community of thousands, scattered over hundreds of miles of mountains and forests, for the putative actions of a few. This rumor-mongering approach is all too common among opponents of Falas Mura *aliyah* and should be supported by evidence or abandoned. Yuli Tamir's compassionate picture of Falas Mura suffering is accurate in all but one commonly mistaken detail: the Falas Mura do not live in "temporary camps." Rather, they live in the appalling slums of Addis Ababa, and the miserable little shanties of rural Gondar. While there are no transit camps, there are compounds run by NACOEJ in each area, offering accredited schools and meals for thousands of children, simple synagogue space, adult education, and food distributions to families. In Addis, there is a paid employment program for over 800 families, whose embroidered products are marketed in North America. In Addis there is also a

mikvah, built like most compound structures by community volunteers. NACOEJ aid is admittedly inadequate to prevent severe suffering, but the Joint, with far greater resources, has steadfastly refused to increase their level of medical care or provide housing stipends as they did in the past. The crowding Yuli Tamir speaks about takes place in the unheated, unfurnished, unsanitary, leaky hovels in which as many as 20 people huddle without even adequate blankets or mattresses. Some have no shelter at all. Unless the organized Jewish community of the Diaspora provides additional funds, the suffering and dying will no doubt continue and increase until Israel at last responds to the urgent demands of its own citizens and North American Jews to check credentials and act upon them.

Barbara Ribakove Gordon is a founder and executive director of NACOEJ, the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry.

Falas Mura Resources

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To share your thoughts about the Falas Mura issue, please visit www.shma.com. Check out www.SocialAction.com (Chanukah section) for more articles on the Falas Mura.

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