

# Medina & Halacha

Exploring the Jewish State  
through the lens of Jewish Law

By Rabbi Shimshon HaKohen Nadel

---

## The Fate of Ethiopia's Jews

In November 2015, Israel's Knesset decided to bring the remainder of Ethiopia's Jewish community home to Israel. But three years later, Israel has not yet to made good on its promise.

Some question their status as Jews: Are those left in Ethiopia today really Jewish? Or, are they opportunists just looking for a better life in the State of Israel?

Last month, I had the opportunity to visit Addis Ababa and see for myself.

As my plane was touching down in Addis Ababa, Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu had just announced that 1000 could make aliyah. For many this is too little too late.

Unfortunately there is so much misinformation about the community tossed about in the media. What's missing from the conversation is some important history and background.

The earliest mention of a Jewish community in Ethiopia is the 9th century work, Sefer Eldad HaDani. Eldad HaDani (literally from Dan) documents his travels throughout North Africa and the Mediterranean, visiting communities, weaving tales, and teaching unique Halachot. He claims to come

from a powerful, independent Jewish kingdom in East Africa, comprised of the descendants of the lost tribes of Dan, Naftali, Gad, and Asher. He also mentions other lost tribes, their whereabouts and histories, and makes reference to "sons of Moses" also residing in Africa.

Following Eldad's visit to the Jewish community Kairouan, Tunisia, the community sends a letter to Rav Tzemach Gaon of Sura, questioning Eldad's account. Rav Tzemach Gaon replies that indeed his account is reliable, as are the halachot he teaches.

But in his Commentary to Sh'mot 2:22, Ibn Ezra questions the veracity of the accounts in Sefer Eldad HaDani. Maharam MiRotenberg too expresses his reservations (Teshuvot Maharam 193).

Yet Eldad HaDani is cited by Rashi, Raavad, Rabbeinu Asher, Rashba, Semag, Avraham ben HaRambam, among others, as a reputable source. Later authorities too would rely on his testimony and quote halachot he taught. Some even call him rabbi!

Twelfth century travelers Benjamin of Tudela and Prester John both record the presence of a Jewish community in Ethiopia.

In letters to his family written while in Jerusalem, Rav Ovadia MiBartenura affirms the tradition. In a letter to his father dated 6 Elul 5248 (August 15, 1488) he reports that while in Egypt, he saw dark skinned Jews from Ethiopia who lacked knowledge of the Oral Law and its traditions. In a letter to his



brother written 27 Elul 5249 (August 24, 1489), he reports that Yemenite Jews in Jerusalem confirm that there are Jews in Ethiopia beyond the River Sambatyon, alluding to the rabbinic tradition of the place to where the Lost Tribes were exiled (Avraham Yaari, *Igrot Eretz Yisrael*, pp. 132-133, 140-141).

Writing in the 16th century, Radbaz rules (*Teshuvot ha-Radbaz* 4:219; 7:9) that the Jews of Ethiopia are indeed descendants of the Tribe of Dan, affirming the account of Eldad HaDani. In another teshuva, the Radbaz is emphatic that they are unquestionably of Jewish lineage according to halacha (*Teshuvot ha-Radbaz* 7:5). A student of the Radbaz, Rav Ya'akov Castro issued a similar ruling (*Erech Lechem*, *Yoreh De'ah* 158).

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Christian missionary groups began aggressively targeting the Jewish community for conversion. Missionaries Samuel Gobat, John Martin Flad, and Henry Aaron Stern describe the Jewish community and document their missionary activities during this period in books they would later publish.

At the same time there was renewed interest in the plight of the Jews of Ethiopia by Jews in Europe.

In 1864, Rav Azriel Hildeshiemer issued a call to action to counter missionary activity. In 1908, a letter signed by 43 prominent rabbis of Israel and the Diaspora encouraged the Beta Israel to be steadfast in their faith. Visits to Ethiopia by Jewish scholars and educators followed.

In 1912, Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook wrote a letter expressing his sincere support in sending teachers to Ethiopia to educate the community (*Igrot HaRa'ayah* 2:432).

Following the founding of the State of Israel, the status of Ethiopian Jews would once again be discussed and debated to determine whether they would be eligible to immigrate under Israel's Law of Return.

In 1951, Chief Rabbi Yitzchak HaLevi Herzog was asked by the Jewish Agency to rule on the status of the Ethiopian Jews. In a letter written in 1954, Rav Herzog debates their pedigree, and due to a number of concerns concludes they would require conversion.

Part of Rav Herzog's hesitation was a concern for Mamzerut. While he was not the first one to raise the issue, Rav Herzog was concerned that the Kiddushin of the Ethiopian community might be valid Kiddushin, while their Gittin is not valid, creating serious problems with Mamzerut. Conversion to Judaism would wipe clean any potential problems with lineage.

Almost twenty years later, in February, 1973, Rav Ovadia Yosef ruled that Ethiopian Jews should be accorded full halachic status as Jews. Rav Ovadia Yosef's ruling helped set in motion a chain of events that would change the government's attitude and policy towards the Ethiopian Jews, and eventually lead to the dramatic airlifts of Operation Moses and Solomon.



In 1975 the Beta Israel community was officially recognized as Jewish by the State of Israel under the Law of Return, and in 1977 they began to arrive as Olim.

In a subsequent teshuva written in 1985, Rav Ovadiah addresses Rav Herzog's ruling and writes, "I did not want to differ from the authority of Rav Herzog, for the sake of the good. But in point of law, I do not agree, and it is my opinion that one should rely upon the aforementioned rulings, that the Falashas are Jews in every respect, and are in no need of conversion, even out of stringency" (Yabia Omer, Even HaEzer 8:11).

In a teshuvah dated 26 Sivan 5644 (June 26, 1984) Rav Moshe Feinstein rules that the Beta Israel need to undergo a conversion to remove any doubts, "and we shall consider them like all Jews, and assist them and support their needs, both physically and spiritually."

Rav Moshe concludes and writes, "And I suffered great anguish because I have heard there are those in Israel who are not drawing them close in spiritual matters and are causing, Heaven forbid, that they might be lost from Judaism. And it seems to me these people are behaving so only because the color of their skin is black. It is obvious that one must draw them close, not only because they are no worse than the rest of the Jews and because there is no distinction in practical application of the law because they are black, but also because perhaps they are considered converts and are therefore included in

the mitzvah, 'You shall love the convert.' And I conclude with the hope that the situation will improve, and in the merit in observing all the mitzvot, we should all soon merit to the ingathering of the exiles by our righteous Messiah." (See also Igrot Moshe, Yoreh De'ah 4:41).

Similarly, Rav Eliezer Waldenberg, Rav Shach, Rav Shalom Yosef Elyashiv, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, and Rav Yitzchak Weiss all required they undergo conversion (Tzitz Eliezer 17:48).

The official position of Chief Rabbinate is that the Beta Israel have a strong presumptive status as Jews, but require conversion to rule out any doubts.

The community that remains today in Ethiopia numbers approximately 8,000 souls. Two-thousand in the capital, Addis Ababa, and six-thousand in Gondar in the North. They sit and wait while the government of Israel reaches a final decision regarding their immigration. Dubbed the derogatory 'Falash Mura,' many of them are descendants of those forced to convert to Christianity a century ago. They currently live as Jews and will undergo a full conversion upon making Aliyah.

Visiting with the community in Addis, I was surprised to learn that they all have family already in Israel - many of them immediate family - that they long to be reunited with. Today, mothers are forced to decide whether to stay with children in Ethiopia, or be reunited with children already in Israel.



I was also surprised to learn that the members of the community are not originally from Addis Ababa or Gondar. They hail from rural villages scattered throughout Ethiopia and Eritrea, having moved to these major cities in recent decades in hopes of making aliyah. They have made sacrifices, and today suffer silently as refugees as they wait in congested cities, living in poverty with a lack of opportunities. They are mistreated by their gentile neighbors and seen as outsiders by their society.

Arriving early on a Sunday morning, I joined them for Shacharit at the Tikvat Zion synagogue. On a regular Sunday morning almost 200 people - men, women, and children - filled the synagogue and prayed in Hebrew and Amharic for almost two hours! Something that would put most shuls to shame!

In the afternoon, the local chapter of Bnei Akiva met. Young people gathered together to study Hebrew in preparation for a life in Israel. I got to teach, sing, and interact with the youth.

What I found was a community, sincere in their desire to join the rest of the Jewish People; waiting to return to Israel; hoping to reunite with their family and their homeland.

For anyone who questions their sincerity they just need to visit Ethiopia and see for themselves. My opinion - and my life - was forever changed.