

THE ETHIOPIAN-ISRAELI COMMUNITY

Updated February 2021

In December 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the first of a series of flights brought hundreds of new Ethiopian immigrants to Israel. The journeys took place as part of a decision by the Israeli government to enable the immigration of some 2,000 members of the *Falas Mora* community (see below), many of whom already have immediate family members living in the Jewish state.

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other senior ministers attended various arrivals, witnessing the emotional family reunification scenes that took place at Ben Gurion International Airport. Minister of Aliyah and Absorption Pnina Tamanu-Shata, who herself made Aliyah with her family as a child from Ethiopia, accompanied one of the flights.

Ethiopian Aliyah is a cause that has long been **championed by Jewish Federations**, and Federation funding has strongly supported efforts to facilitate the process of immigration and absorption carried out by The Jewish Agency for Israel, as well as other partners, including The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the Ethiopian National Project.



Pictured: Some of the more than 300 olim (immigrants) who arrived in Israel on a flight from Ethiopia on December 3, 2020.

BACKGROUND

THE ETHIOPIAN COMMUNITY IN ISRAEL

“Beta Israel” (meaning “House of Israel”) is the Ge’ez term for the Jewish community of Ethiopia, which is believed to date back to between 2,000 and 2,500 years ago. The community was isolated from the rest of the Jewish world for most of that period, but today, the vast majority lives in Israel.

According to Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics, in 2020 there were approximately 155,300 Ethiopian Israelis living in the country, representing 1.7% of the overall population. Just over half of the community was born in Ethiopia and the remainder were born in Israel to an Ethiopian-born parent. Most Ethiopian immigrants arrived in two major waves of immigration: Operation Moses in the mid-1980s and Operation Solomon in the early 1990s.

A JEWISH COMMUNITY FROM ETHIOPIA

In 1973, the late Sefardi Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, who is considered one of the most important “poskim” (arbiters of Jewish law) of the generation, held that the Beta Yisrael community should be considered Jewish from a *halachic* (Jewish Law) perspective. Nonetheless, this position was not formally adopted by the country’s Chief Rabbinate until 2019. In practice, some Ethiopian Jews were required to undergo conversion ceremonies. Those who did not, faced difficulties, on occasion, when dealing with local Rabbinate bodies and other officials.

In November 2019 Israel’s Chief Rabbinate decided to officially recognize the Jewish status of the Beta Yisrael Ethiopian community. The Chief Rabbinate’s new position has gone far to eliminating the problems and questions and finally adopt the ruling of Rabbi Yosef from almost 50 years ago.

All Beta Yisrael members who wanted to move to Israel, have already done so. Any remaining member of the community who wishes to come to Israel, can make Aliyah automatically under the Law of Return.

FALAS MORA

A second Ethiopian community, known as Falas Mora, has also struggled for recognition. Falas Mora are Ethiopians who are descended from a group that broke off from Beta Israel and converted to Christianity in the late 19th Century. Many have since re-adopted Jewish customs and traditions (and some Jewish traditions even remained when the community were practicing Christians).

The Israeli government, world Jewry and other bodies have long struggled to find agreement as to how to deal with the Falas Mora. Unlike the Beta Yisrael, the group has not been able to make Aliya under the Law of Return (that gives all Jews the right to immigrate to Israel) and instead those who have moved to Israel did so in accordance with the country’s Law of Entry. The problem has been made particularly acute by the fact that some Falas Mora have moved to Israel, leaving immediate family members behind.

In 2015, the Israeli government pledged to reunite all Ethiopians with their families under the Law of Entry (which, unlike the Law of Return, does not require those moving to be Jewish), provided they have first-degree Jewish relatives in Israel. A list of 8,000 names, written up in the 1990s, serves as the basis for the permission, but the list has expanded over the years and there are multiple lists with no single authoritative source of data to inform the Government’s work. Thousands of individuals still remain in Ethiopia awaiting approval, despite so many from the main list having already moved to the Jewish state. The situation for those still waiting is extremely challenging as many face very difficult economic circumstances coupled with local political unrest. Members of the community complain that Israel lacks a clear and consistent policy regarding their eligibility to make Aliyah, though the government, together with the Jewish Agency for Israel, has enabled more than 11,000 Falas Mora to move to Israel since 2010.

The Falas Mora today make-up some 50% of the Ethiopian Israeli community and were all required to undergo Orthodox conversion to Judaism upon arrival. The latest government decision should bring a further 2,000 Falas Mora to Israel.

THE ETHIOPIAN COMMUNITY IN ISRAEL TODAY

First-generation immigrants from Ethiopia faced major obstacles to integration, complicated by low levels of formal education and literacy, lack of job skills suitable to an industrialized workforce, cultural disparities, and lack of Hebrew language skills. In some cases, immigrants also encountered racial prejudice or lingering doubt regarding their Jewishness. These obstacles translated into persistently low levels of employment and income, lack of representation in government, poor quality of life and health, and for some, a feeling of alienation from mainstream Israeli society. At the time of each major wave of immigration, the Israeli government attempted to facilitate the integration of Ethiopian immigrants through a “master plan” covering issues such as housing, education, employment, and community organization. These plans often produced relatively disappointing results.

Second-generation Ethiopians raised within Israel have fared considerably better and have become far more integrated in nearly all aspects of mainstream society including education, employment, military service and politics. However, significant gaps in achievement remain as compared to other segments of the Israeli public.

In addition, complaints of **discrimination and racism** have persisted. These came to a head beginning in 2015 in the form of widespread (and at times violent) public protests about discrimination in general and police brutality in particular.

In 2019, Ethiopian workers at the Barkan Winery were barred from working with the wine being produced because an ultra-Orthodox kashrut licensing authority maintained that they were not Jewish and that it was therefore forbidden for them to handle the kosher wine. (Barkan later reversed their policy under intense public pressure).

In June of that year, an off-duty police officer shot and killed Solomon Tekah an Ethiopian-Israeli teenager with a ricocheting bullet, following an altercation. Courts held that the police officer broke regulations by aiming his pistol at the ground to fire the warning shot that turned fatal. The killing of Tekah in Haifa sparked renewed nationwide protests, some of which turned violent. The unrest immediately drew accusations of police brutality and racism toward Israelis of Ethiopian descent. Days after the shooting, protesters across Israel blocked roads, burned tires, and denounced what they said was systemic discrimination against the community.

While significant progress has been made in **improving the lives** of Ethiopian Israelis, major gaps remain. Data from 2020 show:

- **Poverty:** Poverty levels in Ethiopian-Israeli households are higher than the overall population of Israel, standing at 33.7% (compared to 19.1% in society at large). While discouraging, this is a dramatic improvement since 2005, when 59% of Ethiopian households lived below the poverty line, compared with 20.6% of all Israeli families. In 2019, net monthly income per household among persons of Ethiopian origin was \$4,335 USD, compared with \$5,342 USD among households in the overall population.
- **Employment:** Mean income for Ethiopian-Israeli households is 28% lower than general society, with most Ethiopian-Israelis still working as unskilled laborers.
- **Education:** The number of students of Ethiopian origin in institutions of higher education has been increasing in recent years: from 2,372 in 2011/12 to 3,546 in 2019/20. Only about one-third of Ethiopian high school students scored high enough on matriculation exams to be eligible for university, as compared to two-thirds of overall Jewish students (see information on ENP, below). Ethiopian girls exceed Ethiopian boys in their rate of success on matriculation exams and are far more likely to attend university and over 70% of Ethiopian university students are women. Among students of Ethiopian origin in upper secondary education, 49.2% are enrolled in the technological/vocational track, compared to 34.7% of their non-Ethiopian counterparts in Hebrew –language education.

- **Social Risk Factors:** Ethiopian-Israelis have higher rates of social risk factors, including significantly higher rates of family dysfunction and drug abuse as compared to overall Israeli society. These problems have proved more challenging to address and official statistics do not clearly point to any significant progress. Approximately 30,000 immigrants of Ethiopian origin (a rate of about 341 per 1,000 persons) were registered at the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Social Services in 2019, meaning that they were recognized by government authorities as being in need of significant assistance. This number represents one out of three Ethiopian-origin Israelis. This percentage is 2.5 times higher than the registration rate of other groups. Of the Ethiopian Israelis who were registered, approximately 80% were defined as needing intervention.
- **Families:** The percentage of single-parent families in the population of Ethiopian origin is especially high (approximately 25% in 2020) – more than twice the percentage of single-parent families in the wider Israeli population (approximately 13%).
- **Crime:** 1,257 Israelis of Ethiopian origin were convicted in criminal trials in 2020, which constituted 7.4% of total convictions, even though Ethiopians make up just 1.7% of the total population. Another worrying statistic is the percentage of juvenile criminal trials that involve youth of Ethiopian origin (14.1%) and is much higher than that of adults (6.9%) in the community.

JEWISH FEDERATIONS

Funds raised through the annual campaigns of Jewish Federations across North America provide both vital undesignated (core) dollars that support the overall work of the Jewish Agency for Israel and the JDC as well as designated funds allocated by individual communities for particular programs. Projects do not distinguish between the Beta Yisrael and Falas Mora communities.

Ethiopian National Project

The Ethiopian National Project (ENP) is a long-term partner of JFNA created to support the successful integration of Ethiopian Jews into Israeli society. ENP is an Ethiopian-Israeli led initiative that includes the Ethiopian-Israeli community as full partners in decision-making, planning and implementation, while steadfastly adhering to the critical importance of external evaluations to reach success. ENP tries to utilize a holistic approach to address challenges faced by the Ethiopian-Israeli community, together with a broad coalition of partners that collaborate and implement programs at local, national and international levels. All Federation-designated dollars are doubled through a Government of Israel match.

Utilizing mappings, and in consultation with the Ethiopian-Israeli community, ENP focuses its interventions on three critical areas: education, excellence and empowerment.

- In 2020-21, ENP is providing its holistic **SPACE** (School Performance and Community Empowerment) Program to 3,500 7th-12th grade students-in-need in 16 cities. The program was created in 2005 and today works primarily with Ethiopian-Israeli youngsters providing scholastic assistance in small groups, with an aim to increase the number of students who achieve full matriculation. Before the program began, Ethiopian-Israeli students faced a gap of 19 percentage points in relation to other students in eligibility for a matriculation certificate, and 33 percentage points in eligibility for a certificate meeting university prerequisites. After some 14 years of the program, the gap between participants in the SPACE program and the general population had shrunk to 5 percentage points for eligibility for a matriculation certificate, and 13 percentage points in eligibility for a certificate meeting university prerequisites.
- **ENP Bridges** strives to boost English proficiency among participants, with the aim of creating a cadre of inspired young students who feel a connection with Diaspora Jewry while forging a deep appreciation of - and

connection to - Ethiopian Jewry and the State of Israel. In doing so, this program benefits Ethiopian-Israeli youth, their Diaspora peers and both respective communities.

- **ENP Project Ti'ud** teaches teens to document the stories of Ethiopian Aliya for all to explore and share, and then crafts syllabi for North American Jewry and Israelis to learn more about the community.

The Jewish Agency for Israel

Supported by both undesignated (core) and designated funds, the Jewish Agency has helped bring Ethiopian immigrants to Israel and worked to facilitate their successful integration into Israeli society, since the start of Ethiopian Aliyah. The Jewish Agency currently focuses its efforts in the following areas:

- *Aliyah*: The Jewish Agency has long played a pivotal role in the Aliyah process of Ethiopian Jews. Through Operation Zur Israel, which began in December 2020, the Agency, together with the Government of Israel, is helping 2,000 Jewish Ethiopians make Aliyah and reunite with their families already living in Israel after more than a decade of separation. For more information see [here](#).
- Provision of *absorption centers* specific to the Ethiopian population, from their arrival through their transition to permanent housing. Each of the absorption centers for Ethiopian immigrants provide housing, activities, food, and emergency medical care for physical and emotional conditions during the early immigration stages.
- *Basic Furnishings and Cash Assistance*: provided as families transition out of life in the absorption centers and into permanent housing.
- *Residential Education* in the Jewish Agency's four Youth Aliyah Villages, which serve approximately 150 Ethiopian teenagers.
- *Educational Enrichment* programs and scholarships for students enrolled in university or preparatory programs for university. During the 2019-2020 school year, the Jewish Agency awarded 70 scholarships to Ethiopian students for higher education and five scholarships for certificate programs. In addition, approximately 25% of the students in the Jewish Agency's "Ofek" pre-army academies are Ethiopian youth.
- The Jewish Agency also provides *ulpanim* (intensive Hebrew language courses), conversion programs and summer camps for kids.

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC)

JDC has been developing programs for Ethiopian-Israeli immigrants and their children for decades, aiming to promote access to opportunities for successful, meaningful education and employment. In the past, JDC's approach was to develop initiatives that specifically targeted Ethiopian-Israelis, such as PACT, Operation Atzmout, and Eshet Chayil (see below). Today JDC has largely shifted to assisting vulnerable members within the Ethiopian-Israeli community through universal programs that target poor families, the working poor, and at-risk teens, young adults and their families of all ethnic backgrounds. Through core and designated funds, JDC is now focusing these efforts on:

Lamerchak is a career advancement employment program that includes many Ethiopian-Israelis, that to date has advanced more than 4,000 people from unskilled positions to professional careers. The program offers participants employment tools, such as coaching, vocational training, interview preparation, and placement support in locations across Israel. After placement, the program continues to provide guidance to participants throughout the training process and the beginning of their employment.

Coding Bootcamp is an intensive shortened training path of only eight months to a career as a web programmer, offering a practical alternative to difficult and expensive three-year academic degrees in computer science. The training program is built for those from vulnerable backgrounds who do not have academic degrees but have innate skills for programming careers. Within one year graduates can earn high salaries in Israel's IT industry. Today, 60% of program participants are Ethiopian-Israeli.

Serving with Honor is a mentoring program for at-risk young adults before and during army service. In Israel, successful military service is often critical to social and economic achievement later in life, as potential employers see it as one of the most important indicators of an applicant's teamwork, discipline, and decision-making skills. Unfortunately, youth from at-risk backgrounds face many barriers to successfully completing IDF service. JDC's *Serving with Honor* program provides individual mentoring and group support to at-risk young people before and during army service and works with IDF commanders to help ensure that these soldiers have a meaningful experience in the military. Furthermore, the program prepares participating soldiers to reenter civil society and, in certain cases, to consider career tracks within the IDF. In 2020, Ethiopian-Israeli young adults makeup 40% (nearly 1,300) of program participants.

You Have an Address aims to provide educational and professional support and guidance to graduates of Youth Villages to help them make the transition to young adulthood, as well as to empower them to successfully integrate into Israeli society. JDC trains alumni coordinators on staff of the Youth Villages to provide comprehensive support, outreach and guidance to Youth Village graduates to enable them to reach their educational and vocational potential and successfully join Israeli society as independent, stable and productive adults. In 2020, over 20% of participants in this program were Ethiopian-Israelis.

Stepping Stones is a dual learning module for at-risk teens that combines high school studies with experiential on-the-job learning opportunities. The program, which serves many Ethiopian Israelis, aims to engage struggling high school students who were at high-risk of dropping out of school and then provide them with life skills and professional training and experience.

JDC-ELKA's Task Force for Uncovering and Addressing Professional Biases is an initiative that tries to improve the security, equality, and integration of Ethiopian-Israelis. The taskforce's basic premise is that Ethiopian-Israelis' integration is blocked by systemic biases toward Ethiopian-Israelis. The taskforce seeks to transform the way professionals throughout Israeli society relate to Ethiopian-Israelis, regarding school, employment, housing, mental health, military service, and other areas where inherent biases, stereotypes, and preconceptions have been revealed.

A partnership between JDC-ELKA and the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) with support from the Baron de Hirsch Fund, the taskforce is unique in its focus on the service environment rather than Ethiopian-Israelis themselves. It builds on foundational work carried out by the PMO's Directorate for Integration of Ethiopian-Israelis aimed at understanding the true barriers to Ethiopian-Israeli integration. The task force brings together representatives from government ministries, local municipalities, NGOs, educational institutions, police, and other service providers to create an inter-professional model that will effect change in the way field professionals interact with Ethiopian-Israelis.

For more information, please contact JFNA's [Dani Wassner](#), Director of Communications and Government Relations in Israel.