

# AN EPIC JOURNEY

The Jewish Agency for Israel has embarked on a mission to bring some 200 eligible people from Ethiopia every month to Israel over the next three years, until no one with eligibility will be left in Ethiopia ■ Dan Savery Raz

Ofer Dahan is a very busy man. As Ethiopian Project Director at the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI), he is overseeing a major new initiative to bring the remaining people eligible to immigrate to Israel from Ethiopia. According to a list compiled by the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (NACOEJ) and approved by the Israeli government, there are 7,846 people left in Ethiopia eligible to immigrate to Israel. Instead of providing mass air lifts or scheduled flights in short time spans, as was done in the past, the government decided to transport the Ethiopian immigrants to Israel at a rate of 200 a month over the next three years.

The first immigrants on this program have already started to arrive. "Since January 2011, we have brought 1,120 people to Israel," says Dahan, speaking before a meeting in Beersheva, "and those who are waiting in Ethiopia are going through the process of preparing for Aliyah (immigration to Israel)." This initiative was born out of a decision made by the Israeli government in November 2010, following pressure from Ethiopians already living in Israel who gathered in Jerusalem with placards reading 'No More Discrimination' and 'Bring back Mommy and Daddy.' Although some 120,000 Ethiopian Jews live in Israel, immigration from Ethiopia ended in 2008 according to a previous government decision.

Children at the Jewish Agency's school in Gondar prepare for Aliyah



## The seeds of Israel

The current group of new and future immigrants from Ethiopia, known as 'Falash Mura,' consists of Ethiopian Jews who converted to Christianity as a result of persecution or pressure. In Amharic, 'Falash Mura' means 'landless,' which is the lowest standing in Ethiopian society. Aliyah from Ethiopia has long been a controversial topic in Israel, with rabbis arguing about the legitimacy of the community's Jewish status. Some rabbis have called for all Ethiopian immigrants to undergo a 'strict conversion' or a 'return to Judaism' which includes studying the Torah, immersion in a *mikveh* (ritual bath) and appearing before a rabbinic court.

Although many Ethiopian Jews were converted to Christianity in the late 19th century, a large number kept their Judaism by praying three times a day, maintaining the sanctity of their family and studying the Torah. The Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Shlomo Amar, has determined that the Falash Mura's Judaism should not be questioned any further and that therefore they must be brought to Israel. The immigration program was eventually reopened by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who said, "These are the seeds of Israel - men, women and children - that currently find themselves in the worst living conditions."

The vast majority of Ethiopian Jews arrived in Israel in the 1980s and 1990s during the now famous Operation Moses and Operation Solomon. During Operation Solomon, 14,325 Ethiopian Jews arrived in Israel in one 36-hour period in May 1991, compared to fewer than 500 people who made Aliyah from Ethiopia during the first 30 years of the State of Israel.

Ethiopia's Jewish community has traditionally resided in Gondar, a small city southwest of the Simien Mountains. "The living conditions in Gondar today are very bad," says Ofer Dahan, who previously headed the Jewish Agency delegation in South Africa. "All of them want to come to Israel." He says people live in impoverished areas in small mud houses with a lack of food and low levels of education and healthcare.

JAFI has moved all of its Ethiopian operations from the capital Addis Ababa to Gondar, where it has a dedicated Aliyah office and runs a community center that offers lessons on employment, benefits, finances and parenting in Israel. In addition, JAFI runs a Jewish state primary school in Gondar, which is attended by around 600 children from grades 1-6. The school has a library, computer room, an educational game room and, of course, includes Hebrew classes.

## The absorption process

So what makes the current Ethiopian Aliyah effort different from others in the past? "Unlike *olim* (immigrants) from Ethiopia before them, the community today is very well connected," answers Dahan. "They have cell phones and can talk to their families who are already in Israel. They know what they are going to. They have expectations of life in Israel. And we ask the Ethiopians in Gondar which part of Israel they would like to live in.

Usually they go to absorption centers near their existing family. For example, if they have family in Safed, they will want to be in Safed."

In many ways, it is similar to Aliyah from other countries. Most olim require help with accommodation, ulpan (Hebrew classes), employment and bureaucracy. JAFI provides the first point of help for immigrants to Israel. Ethiopian immigrants can choose to stay at one of 16 special absorption centers all over Israel, including nine in the northern Galilee region and three in Beer Sheva.

"The challenges they face in the first days in Israel are enormous," says Dahan. "When they arrive in Israel, their daily schedule is very busy. Adults spend half of the day studying and the rest of the time preparing for their independent life in Israel, while the children are in school."

There are approximately 5,500 Ethiopian immigrants living in absorption centers throughout Israel. Of these, some 2,000 children and youth are taking part in the Yesodot program. There is no kindergarten in Ethiopia, so children are often faced with a big educational gap when they join the competitive world of Israeli schools. Yesodot offers daily afternoon lessons for Ethiopian children in subjects such as Hebrew, English and mathematics, as well as sports and even Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation.

Traditionally, the immigration process has always proved to be much more difficult for the elderly population. "Like every other community, the elderly always find it harder to move from one country to another," says Dahan. "It's the same in this case." It seems JAFI has learned much from previous waves of Aliyah and now offers programs for Ethiopian adults of all ages, plus it is planning to open a special home for the elderly.

## Empowered and employed

The heart of JAFI's new strategy is to 'Inspire, Connect and Empower.' In its work in the Diaspora, JAFI aims to inspire and connect Jews to Israel in new ways, as well as continuing to empower olim after they have arrived. Dahan explains that JAFI has developed a new method of mentoring to help olim once in Israel. "Each and every member of staff now receives special training and has three or four families that they mentor on independent life in Israel," he adds. "The idea is that the olim feel that they are independent from day one."

The empowerment program covers the six key areas of language, home, utilizing services, family, identity and employment. The program starts from the basics of time management and celebrating Jewish holidays to the ability to find employment that will realize one's potential.

According to Dahan, an impressive 90% of the Ethiopian adults of working age find jobs in Israel. The real question is: what kind of work? Due to a lack of experience in the business world, a large number of Ethiopians initially find low-paid work as cleaners, gardeners or kitchen help. But through mentoring and other forms of training, JAFI can assist immigrants to find jobs in their chosen profession.



Photo: Haima Elzohar, Agency for Israel

The Jewish Agency's Eli Cohen welcomes a new immigrant from Ethiopia

"If you look today at the Ethiopian community - there are a lot of success stories," says Dahan. "There are Ethiopian Knesset members, others work in education, social work and lots more fields. But on the other hand, many of them are still very poor, so we are trying to help them."

One notable success story is Shlomo Molla, who is now a member of Knesset representing the Kadima party. Molla was born in a small Ethiopian village in 1965 and attempted to immigrate to Israel in 1984 on foot, after being overlooked by Operation Moses and Operation Joshua. Eventually rescued by Israeli forces in Sudan, he served in the IDF, studied at Bar Ilan University and became Head of JAFI's Ethiopian Division before joining the Knesset in 2008.

Other inspiring figures include Abatte Barahun, a saxophonist who arrived in Israel in 1999 and worked as a dishwasher before becoming a recording artist, and Kabra Kasaim the lead singer for the Idan Raichel Project who was born in a Sudanese refugee camp to Ethiopian Jewish parents during Operation Moses. Although it is still the poorest community in the country, it seems that the Jews of Ethiopia are gradually finding their voice in Israel. "Israeli society has changed its perception of olim from Ethiopia," says Dahan. "They are now Israelis. Indeed, the term 'absorption' seems almost out of date in modern Israel."

In a relatively short period of time, Ethiopian immigrants have become an integrated part of Israeli life, yet they have also added much to the diversity of the country with their own culture. With the support of organizations such as JAFI, this ancient Jewish community, with an epic history of its own, can finally grow and flourish. ■

## Ethiopian Jews in numbers

- 7,846 people who are eligible to immigrate to Israel are left in Ethiopia according to the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry.
- 1.75% of Israel's population comes from Ethiopia.
- 38,500 (32%) of Israel's Ethiopian community are native-born Israelis.
- 240 Ethiopians made Aliyah in 2009, compared to 800 in the first two months of 2011.

For more details on the Jewish Agency for Israel's Ethiopian Project, see [www.jewishagency.org/ethiopianproject](http://www.jewishagency.org/ethiopianproject).