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History 2627 – Diaspora and Homeland

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Beta Israel

Cushites, Danites, Jewish Aksumites, African Israelites, the lost tribe of Dan, Falasha, Beta Israel, Ethiopian Jews, and Abyssinian Jews – all these are some of the names for one people whose identity is a blur between Israelites, Jews, and Africans. Because of their mixed identity and because their origins are highly debated, there is no definitive homeland for the Beta Israel. They live in both Israel and Ethiopia, and could easily have originated in either. This defining characteristic of Ethiopian Jewry – that is, the general lack of definition when dealing with their history – raises questions as to the Jewish Diaspora from Israel, and to the idea of a Beta Israeli diaspora of its own. Whether the group is in Diaspora from Israel and the Jewish people or are in their own recent diaspora only from Ethiopia depends on several factors. Though the possibility of their diasporic state remains a topic of debate, analysis suggests that this group is, indeed, in a diaspora.

To classify the Ethiopian Jews as being in a diaspora, first an understanding for the term ‘diaspora’ must be established. As Robin Cohen, a reputable sociologist, explains, diaspora has no easy or clear definition. A basic definition he provides – though he points out that it is not comprehensive or complete – suggests that a diaspora exists when a people with a strong identity or connection to a homeland is separated from that homeland:

The idea of a diaspora... varies greatly. However, all diasporic communities settled outside their natal... territories, acknowledged that “the old country”... always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions.... a member’s adherence to

a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with owners of a similar background. (Cohen ix)

Other definitions certainly exist, with varying degrees of specificity. For the study of Beta Israel, however, the most important concept regarding diaspora is simply its inseparable relation to the idea of homeland.

This fact itself starts the trouble in analyzing Ethiopian Jewry as a diasporic group. Their collective origins, and thus their homeland, remain unknown. Because groups such as the gypsies have acquired recognition as diasporic groups by scholars (Cohen 101), a precedent is set, however, that a group must not necessarily have a defined homeland in order to qualify as a diasporic group. The interesting qualifier in Ethiopian Jewry's question of diaspora is not whether they have a homeland, but which land is their homeland – Israel or Ethiopia. If the gypsies are accepted as a group in diaspora, Ethiopian Jews must also count as such. If Beta Israel had not experienced a mass-migration to Israel in recent years, however, the group might not hold a diasporic reputation.

If their origins are in Ethiopia, perhaps Beta Israel was not in diaspora until the migration to Israel. If they are considered a part of the Jewish/Israelite Diaspora, on the other hand, then they lived in Ethiopia only as a Diasporic group, and their move to Israel was more a *return* and repatriation to/of Israel and may in fact be an end to their Diaspora. That is to say, if Ethiopian Jews are really Israeli Jews in Diaspora, then their move to Israel ended their Diaspora. If, however, they are really Ethiopians, and are a distinct group wholly separate from the Israeli Jewish people, then their move to Israel actually *began* their diaspora. Either of the approaches still posits that the Ethiopian Jews are or were in a diaspora, and largely depends only on

technicalities and details to determine, rather than depending upon broader and more generally-applicable theories and interpretations.

So determining whether this people is currently or was historically a group dispersed from their homeland depends upon first determining where the people are from. This being the most argued topic in Beta Israel ethnography, no answer comes easily. The origins of Beta Israel could relate to one or more of a wide array of stories told throughout time. They could be of Israeli origin, suggesting that the recent migration movements to Israel are ending their period of Diaspora with repatriation. Otherwise, they could be Ethiopian in origin, suggesting that their recent migration movements to Israel are beginning a diaspora from their African homeland.

Scholars agree that Ethiopian Jews were separated from world Jewry for a great period of time (Kaplan 14, Gomez 25), but the time at which they were separated is argued, as is the reason why. Too many explanations exist to present them all, but a presentation of the more common theories should give excellent insight into the situation. To start, a major theory of Ethiopian Jewry's origins finds its basis in the Bible. According to the Beta Israel, they may actually have a more directly-connected lineage to King David of Israel and Judea than most other world Jews can claim. They identify themselves as Israelites (Gomez 24), and relate the biblical story wherein King Solomon (also known as Shelomoh ben David and Jedidiah) met with the Queen of Sheba, known to the Ethiopians as Makeda. While the biblical account does not explicitly say such, Ethiopian tradition tells that Jedidiah and Makeda had a child together. This child went on to follow the Jewish faith and rule the Abyssinian kingdom, where the Abyssinian Jews would thus originate (Kaplan 22-23). The subjects of King Makeda were not Jewish prior to his reign, by this tradition, so their origins would be rooted only in Ethiopia, and not in Israel.

In the broader historical context, the biblical account and its Ethiopian addendum could hold some truth. It relates to various other stories which use different names for the land, such as Aksum and Cush. The kingdoms also appear named in ancient texts such as the Torah, the Qur'an, and ancient Greek and Egyptian documents (Kaplan 20). In this sense, the time-frame (10th century B.C.E.) of the creation of the Ethiopian Jewish Kingdom fits. Of course, even with great circumstantial support for the story, scholars give little credence to the Solomon-Sheba story (Gomez 25).

A Chief Rabbi of Israel declared once that, contrary to the Solomon-Sheba story, Beta Israel was actually a group descended from the lost tribe of Dan, one of the ten Jewish tribes of the southern kingdom that disappeared at the time of the Babylonian conquest and the destruction of the First Temple (Kaplan 24-25). In fact, Ethiopian Jews are credited with attributing their origins to the Solomon-Sheba story, but some sources indicate they have a tradition of association with the tribe of Dan, as well. The Chief Rabbi did not just propose that the Beta Israel were descendants of the tribe of Dan, but rather based this proposal on historical documents, such as the 1488 letter written by Rabbi Ovadiah (Obadiah) Yare of Bertinoro, who wrote, "they say they are related to the tribe of Dan" (Wikipedia Beta 11, Kaplan 25). Another source, of such claims comes from a 9th century tale from the Jews of Kairowan in Tunisia. According to lore, the Tunisian Jews were visited by Eldad son of Mahli, the Danite. Eldad Ha-Dani, Eldad the Danite, claimed that his African Israelite tribe was descended of the tribe of Dan, which emigrated from Judea after Solomon's death, which would have been in the 10th century B.C.E. (Wikipedia Beta 5, Kaplan 25). The suggestion that the Ethiopian Jews came from the tribe of Dan often refers to the disappearance of the ten tribes of the Kingdom of Israel, which

occurred not in the period directly following Solomon's death, but rather with the Assyrian conquering in 722 B.C.E., nearly 200 years later than when Eldad's tale suggests.

The ten lost tribes, Dan included, are generally considered to have disappeared into the sands of time, but the proposition that one of the tribes might have fled south to the land of Cush has little evidence to the contrary, and thus deserves as much consideration as the suggestion of the love-child of the King of Israel and Queen of Sheba. Even more stories exist, such as one that claims that Ethiopus, after whom the nation Ethiopia is named, was the grandson of Noah (Blady 347). Other common origin-stories suggest a natural migration for simple trade or land reasons, dealing much less with royalty and lineage as with plebeians and tradition (Gomez 25, Kaplan 26-32).

Whether they are migrants or descendants, the Beta Israel are Jews. Rabbinic decrees since the middle-ages have declared such, and such is sufficient evidence to say that they are in Diaspora from Israel. The story of Solomon and Sheba allows for Ethiopia as the people's homeland, but suggests an Israeli lineage and tradition. The other stories all point to Israel as the original homeland. Determining a time-frame for the separation could allow a judgment based on the group's time spent in one land versus the other. For example, Solomon and Sheba's story suggests a separation around the 10th century B.C.E. The connection to the tribe of Dan suggests a separation anywhere from the 10th century to the 8th century B.C.E. The fact that Ethiopian Jewry retains the books of Ezra and a unique holiday, Sigd (or Mehella), which celebrates Ezra's deeds for the Jews, means that their separation should have occurred only after the time of Ezra, who lived during the 5th and 4th centuries B.C.E. However, the Book of Esther – taking place in the late 4th century B.C.E. – accounts for the Jewish holiday of Purim, which is not observed by the Beta Israel (Wikipedia African 3). Their separation most likely occurred before the 2nd

century B.C.E., however, since they do not observe Hanukkah, a Jewish holiday based on events in that era. The Ethiopians also had no tradition of the Talmud, a significant Jewish canon from around the year 200 C.E. (Kaplan 158). Compiling all of these dates suggests a separation somewhere in the mid-4th century B.C.E., but that is only excluding the prior period of Solomon and the tribe of Dan. The story of Solomon suggests no physical origin in Israel, but only a cultural origin with the Israelites. The story of the tribe of Dan, on the other hand, suggests that the Jews lived in Israel for over 1.5 millennia before relocating to Cush, where they then lived for anywhere from another 1.5 to 2.5 millennia (based on two diasporic events from Ethiopia). Considering the other possibilities, however, suggests that the Jews lived in Israel for nearly 2 millennia before their journey to Ethiopia, where they then would have stayed for only 1.5 to 2 millennia. In any of these cases, it is fair to say that the Beta Israel has a deep-rooted history and strong connection to both lands.

Looking at the first of their connections – to Israel – the Beta Israel can easily qualify as a Diaspora group. They may be directly connected to the Diaspora incited by the conquest of the northern Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians. Even if this is not the case, the Ethiopian Jews have various other connections to the land of Israel and the Israelites. As such, the Ethiopian Jews are, as they call themselves, Israelites, and lived in Ethiopia only in Diaspora from Israel. While the primary parameters of a diaspora fit this case, stronger evidence comes from the lives of Ethiopian Jewry in Ethiopia. Because a part of the nature of diaspora groups is to maintain their identity while in diaspora (Cohen 129, 173-175), Ethiopian Jewry fits at least a part of the definition of diaspora, regardless of its origins. The Beta Israel maintained a unique identity in Ethiopia throughout time and against great odds – withstanding foreign imperialism, religious war, and persecution (Kaplan 79). Their primary identity in Ethiopia is historically as Jews, not

as Ethiopians. As such, they certainly qualify as a group within the Jewish Diaspora. However, diaspora ought to come to an end when the group is returned to its homeland. In the case of the Beta Israel, this was not truly a reality.

In response to the great persecution facing the Ethiopian Jews in Ethiopia, world Jewry stepped-in numerous times to provide assistance. Cases of such interactions appear centuries ago, but climaxed and are epitomized by Operation Moses, during an unusually severe and dangerous time of persecution for the Beta Israel people. The 1984-1985 campaign executed primarily by the Israeli military was an evacuation of an estimated 8-to-16,000 Beta Israelis from refugee camps in Sudan and Ethiopia to Israel proper (Blady 379). This was the beginning of the major movement for Ethiopian Jewry to move to Israel, which had only seen some 473 Ethiopian-born immigrants between 1948 and 1979. Since the 1980s, some 80,000+ Ethiopian-born immigrants have entered Israel, so that the Beta Israeli people are divided at nearly 105,000 in Israel and 22,000 to 50,000 in Ethiopia (Wikipedia Beta 7, 1).

As suggested above, this mass migration to Israel could be seen as an end to the Ethiopian Jewry's Diaspora from Israelite Jewry and Eretz Israel. After all, their social identity was so different from the rest of the peoples in Ethiopia that their presence there was easily explained by Diaspora – by assigning their origins to a distant land outside of Ethiopia. However, the Ethiopian Jewish population also has its own unique identity which sets it apart from the rest of the Jews, not just from the rest of the Ethiopians. Beta Israel, for example, had not only rabbis/priests, but also had a unique tradition of Jewish monks, which died-out around the time of Operation Solomon (a sequel to Operation Moses) (Blady 365). They practiced unique versions of the High Holy Days, during which they never sound the shofar but only make verbal reference to it (Blady 366). Different holidays and traditions, not to mention different

languages, make it difficult for the Beta Israel to *re-integrate* into Israeli-Jewish society (Wikipedia Beta 7-8), and logically give them a sense of diaspora from Ethiopia, rather than a return to Israel the homeland (even though they came into contact with world Jewry while enslaved and often wound up in locations in the Middle East) (Kaplan 82). Also a sign attributed to diaspora, the Beta Israel maintain a distinct economic role in their new land Israel. Suggesting that the Beta Israel are in diaspora from Ethiopia now that they are in Israel is a claim that can partly accredit some legitimacy to the socio-economic factor in diaspora and the way into which Beta Israel fits this model in Israel, as the lower-lower-class, living as a majority below the poverty line and filling only menial jobs when they manage to find employment at all (Blady 384).

A more definitive case of Ethiopian Jews' diaspora from Ethiopia is the enslavement of members of the Beta Israeli community throughout history, and particularly in the 16th, 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. This circumstance of slavery can count as pure diaspora from Ethiopia, or a secondary diaspora from Israel. While enslaved abroad, Beta Israelis were known as both Ethiopians and Jews, and they carried these identities with them despite the many challenges they faced. Their maintenance of an Ethiopian identity during forced-servitude illustrates the same circumstantial evidence for claiming the existence of an Ethiopian diaspora as is used above for arguing in favor of an Israelite Diaspora. In fact, some sources indicate that the Beta Israel had absolutely no knowledge of the existence of Israel and other Jews. Because they were so isolated in Ethiopia, the Beta Israel reportedly believed that they were the only remaining Jews in the world (Blady 350), which suggests that their identity and tradition would entirely base itself within Ethiopia, at least up until the time when the civilizations rediscovered one-another. As a sort of prequel to the migration and evacuation movements of the late 20th century,

there were Jewish movements during the era of slavery wherein individuals with any authority called for Jews to assist in freeing the Beta Israel from slavery, as an act of Jewish community support to protect other Jews and uphold Jewish tradition going back to the Exodus (Wikipedia Beta 4).

Though persecuted, the Ethiopian Jews have/had a well-established homeland in Ethiopia. It is easy to understand why their migration from Ethiopia to Israel could qualify as a diaspora for this reason. Their different culture and traditions keep them a unique group, even in Israel, so that they fulfill part of the defining conditions of diasporic groups – maintaining an independent identity in the host-land.

Meanwhile, the Ethiopian Jews also have a well-established and deeply rooted homeland in Israel and/or with the Israelite and Jewish people. As such, they can qualify as being in Diaspora from Israel, which accounts for their unique identity and lack of integration in Ethiopia. This suggestion, however, is hard-pressed to explain the incomplete reintegration into mainstream Jewish and Israeli culture and society. As a group in Diaspora from Israel, their Diaspora should be completed upon repatriation and the realization of a return to the homeland. To the contrary, the Ethiopian Jews continue to maintain a diasporic sense of community, suggesting a different sense of diaspora.

Murky oceans of information reveal countless stories and interpretations and theories of the Beta Israel, yet none of these has sufficient evidence to support it as fact. In an effort to place some scientific parameters on the subject, researchers have conducted some studies on the genetics of Beta Israelis. Only a few such tests have been conducted so far, and they seem to all indicate a common theme: Ethiopian Jews are more directly descended from Ethiopians and other nearby African populations than from Middle Eastern and “Jewish” populations

(Wikipedia Beta 11-12). One such study concluded that “the Beta Israel people descended from ancient inhabitants of Ethiopia who converted to Judaism” (Wikipedia Beta 11). This assertion, however, insults the sciences. Genetics cannot explain religious identity. The fact that Ethiopian Jews have a strong genetic tie to other Ethiopians should come as no surprise – stories of their origins suggest their separation from the rest of Israel some thousands of years ago. Their isolation from Israel proper would restrict the available gene-pool only to inhabitants of the area local to Beta Israel – those inhabitants being Ethiopian. Over the course of multiple millennia’s-worth of generations, any genes originally attributable to Israelites would surely have dissipated and eventually disappeared entirely. Particularly in the Solomon-Sheba case, the genetics having come from only one Israelite while the rest of the population arose from the Ethiopian royalty, Ethiopian genetics make perfect sense, even without taking the elapsed time and passing of generations into account.

Another event that set apart the Beta Israel from the rest of Israel occurred in 1996. Though more a reflection of a common theme during that time-period, the Ethiopian blood scandal revealed and gave rise to many tensions between black Jews and Middle-Eastern and Caucasian Jews. The blood scandal incident was revealed to the public during the height of the HIV/AIDS scare and its proposed connections to Africa. An Israeli blood bank was revealed to have been disposing of all blood donated by Ethiopians – regardless of HIV test results (Salamon 81). This scandal gave face to the issues of racism in Israel, and exemplifies why Beta Israelis often do not feel at-home in Israel. While racism is less likely in Israel to take the form of persecution than of prejudice, ignorance, or generally uncomfortable circumstance, it still is not the most inviting attribute in Israeli society. Racism likely played a role in the constant debate over the ‘Jewishness’ of the Beta Israel, which was deemed halakhically Jewish on numerous

occasions spanning several centuries. The issue of racism still exists, even though there are claims such as that of an African-American researcher and self-described Afro-centrist, who said in 1993 that ““data suggest that discrimination on the basis of skin color is not a problem in Israel”” (Blady 384). A more common story is that mentioned by Israeli journalist Yossi Klein Halevy:

For an alienated minority, a Black African identity is becoming a substitute for a failed sense of Israeliness—an ironic reversal of their parents’ insistence on being Jews, not Ethiopians. (Blady 384)

The general sense of discomfort attributed to the Ethiopian experience in Israel suggests that the Beta Israel population has not yet and may not ever fully integrate into Israeli society. While, anthropologically and ethnographically speaking, this may not be such a bad thing; it suggests that their presence in Israel is as much of a diaspora as their absence from Israel has been historically.

Their origins and originating homeland are unknown and highly debated. Their status as a group of the Jewish Diaspora is not definitive, nor agreed upon. Their status as an African diasporic group depends largely upon their qualification as a part of the Jewish Diaspora, and regardless of the qualification remains and will likely continue to remain a disputed subject. Overall, the Ethiopian Jews have developed quite a mystery about themselves, where they are from, and what they represent. As a Jewish Diasporic group, they appropriately do not assimilate into Ethiopian society. However, the fact that they do not fully integrate into Israeli society after having emigrated and having been air-lifted there in recent years suggests that they are an African diasporic group.

These proposed diasporas – from Ethiopia or from Israel – are mutually exclusive, so to speak. Traditionally, a group would only have one homeland, this being the nature of homelands. Since a group should have only one homeland, it can be in diaspora from only one homeland. Owing to the expanse of time throughout which the Beta Israel diaspora has occurred, however, there is legitimate cause in suggesting that the diaspora is not explicitly from one land or the other, but that it is rather a multi-part diaspora. The group is certainly in a diaspora, but there is no definitive answer regarding to what that diaspora is in relation – Israel or Ethiopia or both.

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