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The Politics of Jewish Exclusion in Israel – the Case of Ethiopian Jews

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the phenomenon of marginal identities in Israel, focusing on the Ethiopian Jewish community as a representative case study. As a multicultural nation, Israel grapples with the intricacies of integrating diverse ethnic and religious groups into its social fabric. Ethiopian Jews, a small and unique group in the Israeli social landscape, face multifaceted challenges in their quest for acceptance.

The research delves into the complexities of identity formation within the Ethiopian Jewish community, considering the interplay of their history of immigration to Israel, unique religious practices, and the process of integration into Israeli society. It is accompanied by comparisons to other aliyot, in particular Mizrahi Jews and post-Soviet Jews.

By analyzing the power dynamics that define Ethiopian Israelis' status within Israel's imagined community, this paper seeks to unveil the reasons behind their marginalization in the country, in particular focusing on the construction of Israeli national discourse. Ultimately, this paper aims to deepen the understanding of marginal identities in Israel, using the example of Ethiopian Jews to shed light on the broader challenges faced by marginalized communities in diverse societies. The paper offers valuable insights for policymakers, social advocates, and scholars striving to promote inclusivity and social cohesion within multicultural nations.

KEYWORDS: exclusion, marginal identity, Ethiopian Jews, Israel

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Introduction

■ **Since the founding of the State of Israel, and with the mass *aliyot* (immigration) from all around the world, Israeli society confronted the challenges of becoming a melting pot. The matters of marginality and inclusion were not central to the Israeli public discourse of the first several decades of its existence due to much more pressing issues of physical absorption of large groups of migrants, problems with housing, unemployment, and wars. With the improvement of the quality of life emerged the necessity to create an Israeli identity that was reflective of the diverse Israeli population. The European Jewish identity was situated as the unequivocal cultural fundament of the State of Israel, which is not surprising since the "founding fathers" and ideologists of the Jewish state came from nineteenth-century Europe. In addition, the colonial view of European cultural and social norms as superior to those of other regions was prevalent among the European Jews of that time. Slowly the dominant European-based identity started mingling with those of other groups opening a debate about marginality and inclusion in Israel.**

The article presents the ongoing discussion on Jewish marginality in Israel. The article's subject matter is the immigration of Ethiopian Jews and the struggles of exclusion. In the first section, the author frames the marginality in the context of Israeli society on the examples of Mizrahi Jews and post-Soviet *aliyah*. The second chapter focuses on the history of the formation of the Ethiopian Jewish (Beta Israel's) identity before the encounters with the European Jews. The third chapter analyses the hegemonic narratives about Ethiopian Jews in Israel as well as the role of whiteness/blackness in these narratives. The paper is based on the following hypothesis: Ethiopian Jews' marginality in Israeli society stems from the white European hegemonic narrative that serves as the Jewish state's cultural and social foundation.

As Yochanan Peres (1971, p. 1021) points out, ethnic power dynamics in Israel can be divided into two major axes: power dynamics between European and non-European Jews and power dynamics between Jews and non-Jews. The paper is focused on the exploration of power dynamics between the Jews of Israel, which is reflective of the larger inclusion/exclusion patterns within Israeli society and beyond. The power dynamics between Jews and non-Jews – however important – are beyond the scope of this paper.

The current research attempts to provide a critical analysis of the existing hegemonic narrative about the Ethiopian Jewish community. The hegemonic narrative is (re)produced through public, political, and academic discourse. Narrative and discourse are two interconnected concepts used to understand how individuals and societies construct and communicate meaning. They both play crucial roles in shaping our understanding of events, experiences, and identities.

A literature review is employed for the study of the topic. The works of Steven Kaplan (1993), James Quirin (1979, 1993), Steven Kaplan and Chaim Rosen (1994), Abebe Zegeye (2004), and Gadi Ben Ezer (2005), among others, are used for the overview of Beta Israel's origins and history before their arrival in Israel, and the policies enacted by Israeli institutions upon their arrival. A postcolonial approach to the subject matter is necessary to analyze the historical context of Ethiopian Jews' migration to Israel and the impact of the colonial legacy on the construction of narratives about non-European Jews. The recorded lecture of Efrat Yerday titled "Rethinking Israeli Citizenship: The Case of Ethiopian Jews" served as an essential source of the critical analysis of the current discourse that historically marginalized Ethiopian Israelis. Another visual material is an excerpt from the movie "Saadi- Roots in Homeland".

The article is a product of research for the Israeli-Palestinian NGO «Windows – channels for communication» carried out by me in 2021. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the research was conducted entirely remotely, however, I had multiple opportunities to ground my research in the local context. This was made possible through my supervisor in Israel, who provided important insights into the topic and suggested valuable materials, as well as other researchers who offered their guidance and support throughout the research process.

Marginality and inclusion in Israel

The Jewish state faced its first major social challenge after the mass *aliyah* from the Middle East and North Africa in 1949. Israel had to absorb massive numbers of people with distinct cultural and social backgrounds in a short period. This wave of immigration allowed for two distinct social groups to emerge. Compared to their European

counterparts, immigrants from the MENA region were behind in schools, fared worse in the labor market, and struggled to achieve the promised social equality (Morag-Talmon, 1989, p. 25). According to Avi Picard, at the core of the ethnic inequalities was the inequality of resources. The number of Jews from the Islamic states living in *ma'abarot* (transit camps) and poor neighborhoods was disproportionally high (Picard, 2017, p. 2). Numerous protests by the MENA immigrants called for equal treatment, representation in the police force, and measures to decrease poverty in their communities. During these first decades, the matters of culture and identity were secondary to social equality. The Israeli establishment believed that cultural differences between the Ashkenazi Jews and various groups of Mizrahi Jews would disappear over time[1], which could have happened only if the establishment would manage to achieve social equality in a relatively short time. However, as the struggle for equality was being passed on to Mizrahi Israeli-born children the debate about the place of Mizrahi identity in the Israeli society was replacing that of the equality of resources.

Israeli propaganda film "Saadia – Roots in Homeland" from 1951 shows the racist delegitimization of the Mizrahi culture in the first years after the establishment of Israel. The movie is describing the "absorption of immigrants" who arrived from the MENA region to the Israeli transit camps. The story follows young Saadia, a boy from Yemen who is going through reeducation in a camp. Mizrahi children are shown to be eating with their hands, which is contrasted with their Ashkenazi instructors eating with a fork and a knife. Ruthie, a caregiver of Saadia, is "representing the enlightened world". The movie makes a clear distinction between the civilized Ashkenazim and the "dark" Mizrahim. "Ruthie will grant Saadia her light. She will raise him to her level" the movie continues[2].

The idea that Israel as a state should be based on European cultural values was an important part of the Zionist project. After all, all the founders of the Zionist movement were of European origin. The belief that European culture was superior to that of Jews from other parts of the world was widely accepted not only by the Ashkenazim but also by the majority of the Mizrahi Jews. For the Jews from the Middle East and North Africa, Europeans were considered a "positive" reference group, while the Arabs were a "negative" point of reference. The positive vs negative dynamic reflects the complexity of identity formation for Mizrahi Jews, who were perceived to be in the middle between the «Occident» and the «Orient». European hegemonic discourse of the Zionist project believed there was a need for them to abandon the «negative» oriental features and adopt the fully Western lifestyle to fit into a new society (Peres, 1971, p. 1021). This hierarchy of cultures was rooted in European colonial projects of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. When Western educational institutions emerged in the Islamic world, especially when the French-Jewish universities *Alliance Israélite Universelle* started appearing in French colonies, Jews who lived in this colonial environment internalized the hierarchy that situated European culture at its peak. For the Jews living in the Islamic states getting on top of the social hierarchy meant learning a European language, gaining European education, and adopting European cultural norms. Those Mizrahi Jews who grew up in non-colonial settings, i.e. Yemen or Kurdistan, were not familiar with this hierarchy until they emigrated to Israel (Picard, 2017, p. 3).

By the middle to late 1970s economic gap between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Jews started to narrow and only after more than twenty years Mizrahi Jews were transitioning into the middle class (Picard, 2017, p. 16). The easing of economic hardships and improved living conditions allowed many to refocus on the marginalization of their cultural and ethnic identities. In the mid-1970s Israel had seen a revival of the MENA Jewish culture, which gradually gained legitimacy within the Israeli society. After three decades of living in Israel, the Mizrahi-Jewish identity did not disappear, moreover, it was growing along with the recognition of MENA Jews as equal citizens of Israel.

Perception of Mizrahi culture as inferior to the European one was common in the first decades after the establishment of Israel. These attitudes placed the Mizrahi-Jewish identity on the margins of the Israeli cultural landscape. MENA immigrants were called to abandon their native music,

[1] The term 'Sephardim' is often used to refer to North African Jews and those influenced by Sephardic traditions, despite lacking ancestral ties to Spain. This article will use the general designation Mizrahim to denote Jews from the Middle East and North Africa with full awareness of the diversity of the populations that belong to this group.

[2] Pieces of the short film with English subtitles are available on YouTube at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R5VTgOUUKQA [accessed 20.06.2023].

culture, and traditions. In the 1970s and 1980s, after thirty years after Mizrahi Jews first stepped on Israeli soil these dynamics started seeing a radical shift. As social and economic inequalities between the European and MENA Jews were decreasing, manifesting Mizrahi identity became a central part of their fight for recognition. Only then Israeli society started embracing Mizrahi culture as equally valuable, while both Mizrahim and Ashkenazim were gradually rejecting European values as superior in the Israeli cultural discourse.

By the extent to which Jewish communities are spread around the world, each one of them represents a distinct cultural group, and therefore each of these groups' absorption into Israeli society marked different struggles and forms of social ostracism. A notable example is that of the post-Soviet *aliyah* of the 1990s. Although new-coming Ashkenazim seemingly embodied the white European ideals that underpin the cultural foundation of the Israeli state, they were not automatically included in the Israeli imagined community.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, one million (post)Soviet Jews from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) immigrated to Israel in a matter of several years (Galili, 2020, p. 3). Absorbing this wave of immigration was a massive challenge for the country and society. Post-Soviet Jews sparked what could have been the most intense debate about Jewish identity in Israel in the last decades. People, who were excluded from education, the labor market, and the politics of the Soviet Union for being Jewish, after immigration to Israel, turned out to be "not Jewish enough" to be included in the Israeli cultural landscape.

A high level of secularization caused by the USSR's atheist ideology, disinterest in replacing the Russian language with Hebrew, and prioritization of Soviet holidays such as *Novy God* and the Ninth of May over the Jewish holidays alienated post-Soviet Jews, invoking protests against the inclusion of this group into Israeli society. In addition, approximately one-third of post-Soviet immigrants are born to a Jewish father, which is seen as a problem for the Israeli religious establishment. While having a Jewish parent allows one to make *aliyah* to Israel under the Law of Return, religious law only recognizes a person with a Jewish mother as Jewish. Consequently, upon their arrival, many individuals lost their "Jewish status". The Rabbinate viewed immigrants from the FSU with suspicion, questioning their Jewishness even if they had Jewish mothers. Halachic Jews or not, Russian accent and names meant newcomers are met with distrust and face to the need to prove their Jewish identity to religious authorities. As a result, Jews of Soviet heritage face a sense of being treated as "second-class Jews" by the religious establishment (Pogrebna, 2022, p. 48). Besides the socioeconomic gap, post-Soviet Jews struggle with the shame of going through DNA testing before marriage (Azoulay, 2019), the stigma around Russian/Eastern European accents and Russian-sounding surnames, and complete and utter misunderstandings of this group by "veteran" Israelis (Remennick & Prashizky, 2012, p. 59). The unique path to seeking acceptance as members of Israeli society lies through post-Soviet Jews' devotion to the Israeli military. After World War II, Soviet ideology established a significant link between military service and patriotism. Serving in the Israeli military plays a vital role in the process of "Israelization" for the immigrants from the FSU (Former Soviet Union) who are often attacked by the Israeli government for not being loyal to Israeli values (Pogrebna, 2022, p. 51).

The major factor in the integration of Russian-speaking Jews is the size of this *aliyah*, a fifth part of the Israeli population, which made it difficult to exclude this group from the public discourse completely. Moreover, the cultural and social gap between the post-Soviet Jews and the Israeli Jews does not involve racial or ethnic elements, which is usually a significant impediment in the process of integration. This is the case for Ethiopian Jews, a community of Black Jews the size of approximately 160,000 people.

The changing identity of the Jews of Ethiopia

It is difficult to determine when the Jewish community was established in the lands of Ethiopia. According to a vast number of research on the origins of Beta Israel, they are either the descendants of Jews from Solomonic Israel or one of the lost tribes of Israel (the lost tribe of Dan), less popular theories trace their origins to a Jewish military colony in Upper Egypt or claim they are descendants of missionaries from Yemen (Kaplan, 1993, p. 646). Ethiopian chronicles say that Judaism was present in the Axum Kingdom established in the second century by migrants from Southern Arabia (Quirin, 1993, p. 299). Persecution of Jews (as well as Muslims) began in the fourth century when Christianity became the kingdom's religion under the influence of Byzantine Rome. During that time many

Jews moved to mountainous regions north of Lake Tana. According to the oral legends of the Jews of Ethiopia, it is believed that an independent Jewish kingdom – the Kingdom of Simien – had been established in the fourth century. The history of the Jews of Ethiopia is preserved in the Ethiopian chronicles because of the military campaigns led against them by the Christian emperors. Notable was Abyssinian king Yeshaq of the fifteenth century (1413–1430), who was particularly fierce in his desire to eliminate Jews. He used the term "Falasha" – from the Ge'ez language "migrants", "foreigners", "invaders" – to refer to them[3]. Before that time Jews were referred to as "Ayhud" meaning "Jewish" but also "heretic" (Quirin, 1993, p. 299; Kaplan, 1993, p. 653). The name "Falasha" became prevalent in the Ethiopian written sources of the sixteenth century. The name "Beta Israel" emerges within the community during the same period. The Jews of Ethiopia lost the wars led by King Yeshaq and subsequently, their lands were expropriated by the Christian monarchy (Quirin, 1979, p. 237). Beta Israel could only continue their agricultural lifestyle as tenant farmers on the lands that were under the possession of new settlers (Quirin, 1979, p. 238; Zegeye, 2004, p. 604). The final defeat came in the 1620s. That was the time when Beta Israel disappeared from the Ethiopian written sources as they stopped being a military threat to the monarchy (Quirin, 1993, p. 303)[4].

According to Quirin, the fifteenth century was an important point for the Jews of Ethiopia, as under the pressure of forced conversions, land expropriation, and expulsion from their lands they started separating from the Ethiopian Christians. The role of Judaism in the Ethiopian Christian traditions has to be mentioned here. Ethiopian Christian culture draws many of its core elements from the Old Testament and Judaism. As pointed out by Steven Kaplan (1993, p. 647), those include: "…Israelite self-identity, the Saturday Sabbath, circumcision, Biblical dietary laws, and a three-fold division of houses of worship in imitation of the Temple in Jerusalem…". As a result, the distinction between Ethiopian Christians and Jews could seem somewhat vague to the outsider. From the fifteenth century onwards, due to the restrictions on land ownership, Beta Israel started engaging in crafts such as smithing, pottery, and weaving, making them a distinct occupational group. At the same time, Beta Israel started restructuring their religious system. This happened with the help of two figures, Abba Sabra and Sagga Amlak – two Christian monks who converted to Judaism and joined the Beta Israel community. They brought Christian texts translated into Ge'ez, established a monastery and subsequently monasticism as a core element of Beta Israel's religious system, and started teaching Torah. Other examples of the crucial changes brought into Beta Israel's Judaism were purity laws, holidays, and the prayer liturgy (Kaplan, 1993, p. 648). The religious and cultural practices of Beta Israel were being constructed for centuries before and after this period, yet this moment in time should be noted as significant for Beta Israel's identity.

Until the nineteenth century, Beta Israel existed separated from the Jewry of the rest of the world. In the middle of the nineteenth century, a Protestant mission under the auspices of the London Society for Promoting Christianity among Jews led by Johann Martin Flad arrived near Gondar and Lake Tana, regions inhabited by Beta Israel. The main goal of the mission was to convert the Jews of Ethiopia to Christianity (Zegeye, 2004, p. 593). The mission took place with the permission of Emperor Tewodros II (1855–1868) and, according to the Ethiopian monarchy, served the country's national interests. After the arrival of the mission, Western Jewish communities voiced their protest and desire to send aid to the Jewish communities of Ethiopia. In 1867, Joseph Halévy was sent to Ethiopia as the emissary of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*. Even though Halévy expressed great interest in deepening the contacts between Beta Israel and other Jewish communities nothing was done for the next 40 years. Halévy's student Jacques Faitlovitch traveled to Ethiopia in 1904. Faitlovitch attempted to "modernize" Beta Israel by introducing Western Jewish practices into their education program. His ultimate goal was to create a Western-like elite by establishing European education institutions in Ethiopia (Kaplan & Rosen, 1994, p. 61).

The first contact between Jews of Europe and Beta Israel did not take place in colonial settings. As a result, it did not create an environment of domination and subjugation. Yet the European

[3] History of the origins of this particular term varies among scholars, which will be elaborated on later.

[4] James Quirin (1993) offers a comprehensive study of the oral sources of Beta Israel and the way they allowed for the historic continuity in times when Beta Israel disappeared from the written sources. However, this topic is beyond the scope of this paper.

Jews' approach to these newly established relations was based on the presumptions of their own cultural superiority. Even though Faitlovitch dedicated his life to the Ethiopian Jewish cause and largely contributed to their recognition among the world Jewry, his view of Ethiopia was inherently oriental and colonial. Faitlovitch constructed an image of Beta Israel as "more intelligent" and "morally superior" than other Ethiopians (Kaplan, 1993, p. 649). This narrative about Beta Israel explained their unique Judaic practices through their connection with ancient Jewish tribes rather than the Ethiopian Christian environment. Faitlovitch's efforts to create the image of Beta Israel as "better Africans" became embedded in the Israeli public and political discourse and in the Jewish discourse about Beta Israel's Judaism. He set a foundation for a powerful narrative that is still in place today. As a result, this discourse fails to recognize that Beta Israel's Jewishness was not originating solely from their connection to ancient Israel but was in a large part forged in Ethiopia under the influence of Ethiopian history, culture, and Ethiopian Orthodoxy. One of the examples of that is the origin of the name "Falasha". According to James Quirin (1993, p. 300–301), oral and written Ethiopian sources suggest that the name "Falasha" as "migrants" or "foreigners" stemmed from the fact that King Yeshaq expelled Jews from the Wagara province to the surrounding areas. Twentieth-century research of Beta Israel commonly accepted that the meaning behind the name "Falasha" referred to their exile from Israel.

Ethiopian Jews in the Israeli narrative

The Protestant mission of Martin Flad succeeded in converting a modest number of Jews, yet some decided to emigrate. The year 1862 marked the first recorded attempt of Beta Israel to reach Jerusalem. Due to long distances and extreme conditions, it is believed that those Jews never made it (Zegeye, 2004, p. 594).

For the first two decades after the establishment of the State of Israel, there were no attempts to bring Beta Israel from Ethiopia, even though the community expressed a strong desire to resettle in Israel due to the economic hardships, unstable political situation, and persecutions by the Ethiopian society (Kaplan & Rosen, 1994, p. 61). The Israeli government did not include the Jews of Ethiopia in the Law of Return, which gives Jews the right to immigrate to Israel and obtain Israeli citizenship on the grounds of "being Jewish", and did not initiate their immigration due to the Chief Rabbinate's doubts regarding their Jewishness[5]. The "ethnicity" of the Ethiopian Jews had been a matter of debate by the Rabbinate since the first contact with the community. Various rabbinical scholars suggested that due to their skin color Ethiopian Jews cannot be the descendants of the ancient Israelites but have been at some point converted to Judaism (Seeman, 1991, p. 19). This argumentation, or put differently, an argument of "not belonging to the Jewish nation" was strong in the Israeli political discourse up to the 1970s. The relationship between ethnicity and religion has always been a complex issue when discussing Jewishness. The case of Ethiopian Jews brought a component of blackness into this debate.

In January 1973, the Israeli Ministry of Interior released a report, which stated: "According to the opinion of objective scientific researchers, the Falashas are one of the numerous peoples of which the Ethiopian population is composed. From an ethnic and cultural perspective, they are an organic part of the Ethiopian people" (Seeman, 1991, p. 13). As a justification for why Beta Israel did not qualify to be included in the Law of Return, the Ministry wrote: "…From a national-cultural perspective the Falashas are completely foreign to the spirit of Israel…" (Seeman, 1991, p. 13). The Israeli establishment drew a clear line between Ethiopian people and Jewish people and, according to them, Ethiopian Jews belonged to the former and did not belong to the latter. Yet being, for example, German and Jewish was never mutually exclusive. Efrat Yerday (2021) points out, that in the first decades after the establishment of Israel, the laws of entry and documentation requirements for proving one's Jewishness differed depending on the ethnicity of the potential immigrant, once again revealing a stratification system based on whiteness. According to the scholar: "The ethnic definition of who is a Jew within the state's official discourse is fluid, negotiable, and performative, meaning the examination of who belongs to the ethnic nation as a Jew does not derive from a structured and ordered set of laws but rather a subject to ideological and political struggles and interests" (Yerday 2021). In the case of Ethiopian Jews, racialized mechanism underlies the immigration state logic.

[5] What it means to be Jewish is a complex debate that is beyond the scope of this paper.

A group of Ethiopian youth came to Israel in the mid-1950s as a part of a project initiated by Jacques Faitlovitch. The Law of Return did not apply to them, so those students who did not want to go back to Ethiopia chose to stay in Israel without a clear civic status. In 1954, Chief Rabbi Yitzhak HaLevi Herzog ruled that Ethiopian Jews must undergo some form of formal conversion procedure before acquiring Israeli citizenship. In 1957, a special court for the conversion of the Falasha youth was created. Conversion was the only way these young people were allowed to naturalize. Many Ethiopian Jews during the 1960s entered Israel as tourists or migrant workers and remained in Israel illegally after their visas expired. In the 1960s and 1970s, as Ethiopian Jews still couldn't enter Israel under the Law of Return, some of them sought entry through a family reunification under Article 7 in the Law of Entry, which applied to non-Jewish spouses or minors after undergoing special conversion (Yerday 2021). According to Yerday, the Ethiopian case serves as a unique example of "Jewish illegality".

The crucial change came only in February 1973 – a month after the Israeli Ministry of Absorption declared Beta Israel ineligible for automatic citizenship – when Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef ruled to grant Ethiopian Jews full halakhic status, which almost forced Israel's Ministry of Absorption to facilitate the immigration of Beta Israel (Seeman, 1991, p. 13). For the next decade after the ruling of the Chief Rabbi, which seemingly resolved the issue of Beta Israel's Jewishness, the Ethiopian immigrants were still required to undergo a modified conversion ceremony that involved ritual immersion, a declaration accepting rabbinic law, and, in the case of men, a symbolic recircumcision (Kaplan & Rosen, 1994, p. 74). For the Ethiopian Jews, these requirements were offensive and discriminatory and led to numerous protests until in the 1980s the conversion was dropped (Seeman, 1991, p. 13).

Starting in the 1980s, Jews from the regions of Tigre and Walqayit began their journey to Sudan and settled in refugee camps. Some spent two or three years there before being taken to Israel. Although Sudan was officially opposed to the emigration of Beta Israel, several Sudanese government officials allowed the emigration in exchange for large bribes and on the condition of confidentiality (Kaplan & Rosen, 1994, p. 63). As the conditions in the refugee camps were worsening and the civil war in Sudan was causing widespread famine, the Israeli government decided to airlift the first group of Beta Israel from Sudan. The first airlifts took place in November 1984 and were designated "Operation Moses". At the end of the operation around 6700 Jews were airlifted to Israel. Next, followed Operation Joshua in 1985 and Operation Solomon in 1991, which airlifted Beta Israel from Addis Ababa. In total, over twenty thousand Jews were airlifted to Israel (Kaplan & Rosen, 1994, p. 65–66).

In the hegemonic Israeli narrative, the first encounter between the Ethiopian Jews and Israel occurred in November 1984, after Operation Moses. The Israeli hegemonic discourse created a story of the heroic rescue of the Ethiopian Jews which excluded the painful and traumatic experiences that accompanied the airlifts as well as the efforts of Ethiopian Jewish activists who participated in the organization of the airlifts. The hardships of absorption in the unfamiliar settings, family separations, the loss of family members, and difficult living conditions are not a part of the Israeli discourse about Ethiopian Jewish immigration, yet these memories are a vital part of this community's collective memory about their journey to Israel.

Gadi Ben Ezer (2005) writes about three central themes in the construction of the Ethiopian Jewish journey experience: Jewish identity, suffering, and bravery, all of which are linked to the Biblical exodus from Egypt (p. 123). They perceived their experience as reliving the journey of their ancestors, the Israelites, who undertook a strenuous and courageous journey from Egypt to the Promised Land of Israel. After completing their journey, Ethiopian Jews arrived in Israel with a strong sense of both Jewish and emerging Israeli identity. They developed a self-image as brave and resourceful people, viewing their arrival in Israel as a "restoration from exile" (Ezer, 2005, p. 124). Ethiopian Jews believed that their suffering earned them the right to join and participate in Israeli society. They expected to feel complete among their fellow Jews, but their actual encounter with Israeli society ended up being the opposite. Instead of finding the sense of belonging they sought, they faced barriers and rejection. Their authenticity as Jews was questioned, their suffering went unacknowledged, and they were perceived as dependent and helpless, saved from starvation by Israelis. "Thus, the heritage of their journey was neither confirmed nor acknowledged", Ezer writes (2005, p. 125).

While in Israel Ethiopian-Israelis' journey is largely omitted, it is alive within the community. The tale of the journey is shared within the Ethiopian Jewish community across different settings and occasions. It is passed down through generations within families and among friends, spanning

through all generations. These stories are recalled in gatherings during holidays, burials, and mourning rituals. A special memorial forest at Ramat Rachel, near Jerusalem, stands as a testament to those who perished during the journey. On designated memorial days, the community gathers there to recount the events. However, these stories are not limited to formal occasions alone, they also get place at informal meetings and in conversations, for instance, during coffee gatherings, such as the traditional three-round ceremony of *buna*, providing opportunities for people to share and connect (Ezer, 2005, p. 126).

At the same time, Ethiopian Jews are taking action to take back control of their narrative, endeavoring to reshape perceptions and educate the younger generation of Ethiopian Israelis about their heritage by revealing lesser-known aspects of Beta Israel history. The activists underline that the initiative to rescue Ethiopian Jews and bring them to Israel originated from within the community itself, even in the face of police detention and threats. Although the North American Jewish community and the State of Israel played pivotal roles, the journey to Israel was primarily a grassroots effort led by the members of the Ethiopian Jewish community (Steinberg, 2023).

After Beta Israel's immigration to Israel, the Israeli public needed to understand the newcomers. To do so it was necessary to create a story that would fit the Israeli national discourse. The narrative about Beta Israel needed to be inherently descriptive of the general Jewish experience. Words such as "pogrom", "persecution" and "antisemitism" were used to invent a connection between Ethiopian Jewish history and that of other Jewish communities. Ethiopian rulers became "Hitlers", the tales of the tragic loss of life were called an Ethiopian "Shoah", and the airlifts – or "rescue operations" – became a heroic tale that drew parallels between the Shoah survivors and the Ethiopian Jews (Kaplan, 1993, p. 651). As a result, the uniqueness of this group's identity and history was suppressed in favor of a more generally acceptable point of reference that fits into a hegemonic narrative.

Conclusion

The Israeli government takes great pride in the diversity of Israeli society; however, acceptance and recognition are a fierce battle for newly arrived immigrants. Moreover, this fight for inclusion remains part of the newcomers' intragroup identity but never part of the Israeli national discourse. The inherently white European ideology of the Zionist project created barriers to inclusion from the beginning of the existence of Israel. Aside from economic and social disadvantages, Mizrahi Jews faced orientalization by the Ashkenazim, which manifested in decades-long subjugation and marginalization of their culture and identity. MENA Jews were the first culturally distinct group that started gaining recognition within Israeli national discourse, which marked a critical moment for other non-European Jews who found themselves at the margins of Israeli society.

The example of post-Soviet Jews showed that every new-coming aliyah faces the issues of exclusion, even those of white European origin. Indeed, post-Soviet Jews face marginalization and resistance against their inclusion into the Israeli cultural landscape due to the obscurity of their cultural practices and doubts about their Jewishness – two things that Ethiopian Israelis have been similarly struggling with. Yet, while post-Soviet Jews found a way to "become Israeli" by being "good citizens", it showed to not be enough for Ethiopian Jews.

The categories of Jewishness and whiteness closely intertwine, which can be seen in the example of Beta Israel's (un)recognition as Jews by the Rabbinate as well as the Israeli government. Ethiopian Jews' status in Israel reflects the challenges of inclusion in a heterogenous society built on white European narratives. The "blackness" of the Ethiopian Jews is exposing the inherent racism within the Jewish state, which doesn't start from discrimination of the non-Jews but from the exclusion of those Jews who in one way or the other do not fit the hegemonic discourse. The story of Damas Pakada, a young IDF soldier of Ethiopian Jewish origin, getting beaten by police officers in 2015 is a direct consequence of this exclusion. It is not enough for the marginalized minority to be "good citizens" – as it was with post-Soviet Jews – to be included, which the case of Pakada shows. Four decades after the "official" arrival of Ethiopian Jews to Israel, they are still struggling more than other groups to integrate. The research on the adjustment processes of Ethiopian immigrants revealed that their attempts to assimilate into Israeli society were met with feelings of societal rejection. The findings suggest that many of them attribute

their integration difficulties to their distinct skin color, despite being Jewish, which is supposed to be the catalyst for integration (Shenhav-Goldberg, Ginzburg & Barnetz, 2013, p. 503).

On the one hand, Ethiopian Jews are a part of Israel's imagined community – unlike Palestinians and migrant workers, yet their blackness puts them on the periphery of this community. The fluidity of the definition of who is a Jew is closely intertwined with the hegemonic whiteness. Jewish marginality in Israel is ever-changing; however, Ethiopian Jews present an important case of being included and excluded at the same time, unraveling the hidden layer of Israeli hegemonic discourse on who belongs in the Jewish state and who does not.

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