



ההסתדרות הציונית העולמית
World Zionist Organization
המחלקה לפעילות בתפוצות
Department for Diaspora Activities



Ethiopian Jewish Women in Israel

The Ethiopian Jews in Israel

The Ethiopian Jewish community arrived in Israel during two massive waves of immigration mounted by the Israeli government: "Operation Moses" (1984) and "Operation Solomon" (1991). In 2009, about 121,000 Israeli citizens were of Ethiopian descent.

Ethiopian Jews are gradually becoming part of mainstream Israeli society in religious life, military service (with nearly all males doing national service),

education, and politics. Similarly to other groups of immigrant Jews, the Ethiopian community has faced obstacles in its integration into Israeli society. The community's internal challenges have been complicated by racist attitudes on the part of some elements of Israeli society and the official establishment. According to a 1999 report commissioned by Israel's Ministry of Immigrant Absorption, 75% of Ethiopian Jews living in Israel could not read or write Hebrew, and the transition a subsistence economy in Ethiopia and to Israel's industrialized society also caused many difficulties to their absorption. However as time goes on, the Ethiopian Jewish community continues to integrate into Israeli society.



Women in Israeli-Ethiopian Society

One of the greatest changes that the Ethiopian Jewish community has undergone in Israel in their move from an underdeveloped society to a modern, Western society, is in the realm of family and personal relations. Girls can no longer marry at first menstruation; in fact, it is illegal to marry in Israel until the age of seventeen. In addition, girls have to attend school until the minimum age of sixteen. Married women are encouraged to go out to work in order—and approximately one-third do—to assist with the family income, and the wife may earn more than her husband. Quarrels tend to break out between spouses over money and this, coupled with other factors, can have devastating effects on the marriage.



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The Israel Rabbinate has established a special department dealing with Ethiopian divorces. One-third of all Ethiopian Jewish families in Israel are one-parent families; the other two-thirds are largely made up of “complex families” constructed from two or more one-parent families, which are intrinsically unstable. The divorce rate among Ethiopian Jews in Israel is far higher than that among the general population. The single main reason for this is the demasculinisation experienced by Ethiopian Jewish men. Males no longer reign supreme; “Israeli” women answer back. If women are beaten, as was the practice in Ethiopia, they can turn to the police and file a complaint against their husbands—and many do. As the apparent gap between migrant Ethiopian women and men continues to grow, new forms of family structure and adjustments will no doubt emerge.

Questions for Discussion

- Were you familiar with this population? If so, what pre-conceived notions did you have about this community, and specifically about the women in this community?
- Are there aspects of this community that you can appreciate and/or identify with?
- Can you summarize the tensions between this community’s traditional values and practices and the values and practices of contemporary Israeli society?
- What issues in contemporary Israeli society do you think are of special importance to this community, and especially to its women? Choose one of the social issues examined earlier in the program and consider the issue from the perspective of an Ethiopian immigrant woman.