

THE HISTORY OF ETHIOPIAN ALIYAH

Since the early 1950s, Jewish Federations, through their partnership with The Jewish Agency for Israel, have assisted more than 97,000 Ethiopians with their immigration to Israel.

A COMMITMENT ROOTED IN HISTORY

The roots of Zionism in Ethiopia go back to 1862, when a wave of Zionist sentiment washed over the Ethiopian Jewish community. This Jewish community was known as the “Beta Israel” community and practiced non-Talmudic Judaism for centuries before encountering other Jewish communities.

The first emissaries of The Jewish Agency for Israel arrived in Ethiopia in the 1950’s, and already in 1955, a small group of Ethiopian youth was brought to Kfar Batia.

Between 1955 and 1965, approximately 27 Jewish Ethiopian teens, known as the “Kfar Batia Group,” were brought to Israel where they were trained to be emissaries and returned to their communities as qualified and highly skilled teachers. Meanwhile, The Jewish Agency established medical clinics within these communities to serve the Jewish population, many of whom were awaiting approval for Aliyah.

In 1975, the State of Israel announced that the Beta Israel community in Ethiopia would be permitted to make Aliyah to Israel under the Law of Return, paving the way for major Aliyah efforts. By the end of the 1970s, Jewish immigration from Ethiopia took the form of Aliyah of Rescue. Jews from Ethiopia were permitted to immigrate to the Jewish State until 1977 when the dictator, Mengistu Haile Mariam, came to power.

During the decade that followed, immigration was clandestine and managed by the Government of Israel along with The Jewish Agency. Suffering persecution at the hands of Mengistu’s Marxist regime for holding Jewish educational and Zionist activities, many of the Jewish villagers became refugees. The first refugees from the Tigray area walked all the way to Israel with next to no aid.

Understanding the intense need, the Mossad Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations, along with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), joined with The Jewish Agency to establish more effective procedures and improved conditions for Aliyah. The IDF and Mossad began to bring Ethiopian Jews to safety in Israel, and The Jewish Agency welcomed and absorbed the refugees, housing them in youth villages and special sites established for this purpose.

YEARS OF ALIYAH OPERATIONS

In the mid-1980s, “Operation Moses” aided the arrival of 8,000 Ethiopian Jews from refugee camps in Sudan to Israel, via intermediary countries, by foot, plane, and boat.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, tens of thousands of Ethiopian Jews moved closer to Addis Ababa, the center for Aliyah activities in Ethiopia, to await rescue. Working together as partners, The Jewish Agency,

the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and Jewish Federations enabled the launch of a major effort to bring the Jews of Ethiopia home to Israel.

“Operation Solomon” in May 1991 saw 14,300 Ethiopian Jews arrive in Israel aboard IDF, EL AL, and Ethiopian Airlines aircrafts after American intervention helped the Israeli government reach a settlement with Mengistu and the rebels, allowing the rescue to take place within 36 hours.

Throughout the 1990s, the Israeli government, along with The Jewish Agency, assisted Ethiopian Jews of the Qwara Province to reach the Jewish State. Since June 2008, most Ethiopians have made Aliyah in accordance with the Law of Return and its 1970 amendment to include “Zera Israel.” Zera Israel refers to those Ethiopians who are descendants of Jews (Beta Israel) but, for one reason or another, are not considered Jewish according to religious law. It literally translates to “Seed [of] Israel.”

In the early 2010s, immigration according to Zera Israel continued with “Operation Dove’s Wings” which ushered in the Aliyah of 7,000 immigrants from Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. The story of Ethiopian Aliyah appeared



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-JASPA YAGZO



Jaspa Yagzo, 36, was separated from his family 12 years ago when they immigrated to Israel and he was forced to stay in Ethiopia.

After years of longing, Jaspa, along with hundreds of members of the Ethiopian Jewish community, immigrated to Israel in December 2020 on the first flights of Operation Zur Israel, which reunites Ethiopian Jews with their family members already living in Israel.

“I am really excited to make Aliyah. My mother, Atklet, was able to immigrate to Israel 12 years ago but I wasn’t and the separation has been difficult. A few years ago, she visited Ethiopia and met our three eldest sons but she does not know her youngest grandchild, who was born after her visit. She and I are both eagerly awaiting the moment she will truly get to know her grandchildren and live by their side.”

to come to an end in 2013 with the last group flight from Ethiopia and the closure of the education center in Gondar. Of course, eligible immigrants were still able to make Aliyah as individuals.

THE STORY CONTINUES

Even though the Israeli government had officially paused Aliyah from Ethiopia, advocacy groups and family members of those left in Ethiopia actively called for the Aliyah of those remaining in Ethiopia.

In November 2015, the Israeli government announced its intention to bring a new wave of Ethiopians to Israel. In August 2016, the Israeli government passed a resolution for the family reunification of members of the Ethiopian Jewish community who have Beta Israel ancestry or lineage—allowing those who have first-degree relatives in Israel to make Aliyah along with their unmarried children. Once the Israeli government approved the criteria for eligible immigrants, The Jewish Agency prepared to help in this endeavor. In Ethiopia, The Jewish Agency created the necessary infrastructure to implement the Aliyah process and to assist those who were awaiting approval. In Israel, The Jewish Agency prepared and bolstered its comprehensive absorption services to ensure a successful integration into Israeli society. A total of 2,325 Ethiopian Jews made Aliyah from 2016 through 2020.

At the beginning of October 2020, the cabinet approved the immigration of a further 2,000 Ethiopians by Spring 2021 as part of its family reunification program. Those awaiting Aliyah had been eagerly anticipating, some for more than a decade, this important decision that would allow them to make Aliyah and fulfill their dreams

of living in Israel with their family members. Despite living in harsh conditions, they had maintained a strong Jewish identity and carried out Jewish rituals as part of daily life in this ongoing limbo. Between December 2020 and May 2021, 2,150 Ethiopians arrived in Israel through “Operation Zur Israel” (Rock of Israel).

Over the last decade alone, The Jewish Agency has chartered nearly 200 flights from Ethiopia to Israel. Prior to getting on the plane, The Jewish Agency helps Ethiopians in Gondar and Addis Ababa with nutrition, pre-Aliyah preparation courses, and more before their flights to Israel. Once these new immigrants land in Israel, The Jewish Agency provides them with their first home in one of 12 Absorption Centers dedicated specifically to the needs of Ethiopian immigrants, as well as Hebrew and vocational training for adults, academic enrichment and after-school activities for the children, and social and recreational activities for all.

On November 28, 2021, the Government of Israel approved the decision to bring an additional 3,000 Ethiopians to Israel in the next year. The Jewish Agency, which has been at the ready for their arrival, is officially starting the next wave of Operation Zur Israel. New Ethiopian immigrants will be welcomed at Jewish Agency absorption centers and will receive a full range of services and programs in order to successfully integrate into Israel society.