

THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

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CONFIDENTIAL

to Bert Gold

from Abe Karlikow

subject Falasha Update

During 1980 approximately 670 Falasha Jews came to Israel via the Sudan route in some 28 separate movements. There is also a Falasha who was allowed out of Ethiopia for medical treatment and now is on the West Coast; and three youngsters allowed to come directly to Canada from Ethiopia, brought under the auspices of the Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews.

The situation at present is both discouraging and encouraging. Discouraging because there has been no movement since early November via the Jewish Agency channel established early in 1980 for bringing Falashas to Israel. Encouraging in that there is some evidence that the Ethiopian authorities are more open at least to discussion of movement at this point than they were a year ago.

Why has movement halted since early November? Two reasons are offered by those involved. One is that there was the murder, a couple of months ago, of two Eritrean leaders in the Sudan. As a result, it is claimed, a curfew was established that made movement from other parts of the Sudan to Khartoum impossible; and the Falashas have to move out of the Sudan through the capital. The second obstacle arises, curiously enough, because of new U. S. immigration measures. One consequence, for technical reasons, is that it no longer is possible to give Falashas in the Sudan end-visas to the United States. These were never used -- but did enable the UN High Commissioner's Office in the Sudan to move the Falashas to Western European lands, where they switched destination to Israel.

This last blockage brought about a many-pronged effort: to get U. S. administrative understanding that will permit renewal of some form of the previous arrangement; to find other nations to agree to serve as hypothetical end-destination countries; to get Kenya to agree to serve as a transit nation and, indeed, three Falashas have come out this way. For the moment, however, one must still await the results of all this effort.

Critics of Israel government efforts such as leaders of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews deride these obstacles as not being serious ones, as simply a further excuse by the Israelis not to implement Falasha movement. They argue they know that movement inside both Ethiopia and the Sudan is possible, on the basis of reports received by them from some one recently in those lands. They assert that the tie-up with the High Commissioner's Office is not one of end-visas and processing but that of cash: the High Commissioner's Office no longer pays for transport and the Israelis do not wish to assume this cost. This is denounced by people involved in movement as "the phoniest" of charges.

On the other hand there seems to be a greater Ethiopian willingness at least to discuss some movement. Israeli commerce with Ethiopia has picked up significantly during the past year; and in this more favorable atmosphere, an approach was made to the head of the Ethiopian state, Mengistu Haile Mariam. He allegedly expressed personal sympathy but indicated that given the nature of certain of his allies (East Germans and Cubans, the surrogates in Ethiopia for the Soviets) he did not feel he could permit movement. The Kenyan head of state, Daniel Arap Moi, met with Mengistu recently and was asked by one Jewish contact to bring up this matter, but we do not know he did so.

Another initiative centers around Congressman Stephen Solarz. He met with Ethiopian Charge d'Affaires Testaye Demeke, the Ethiopian Foreign Minister and a member of the Dergue, the ruling Ethiopian junta, at a Washington reception some months ago, and the Falasha question was broached. (Demeke's wife is of Falashan origin.) There was talk of an invitation to Solarz, of taking some people out, of creating new institutions in Ethiopia. Demeke subsequently returned to Ethiopia with the other government people. When he came back he indicated to Brant Coopersmith (now heading an organization set up in Washington on behalf of Falashas) that the prognosis for a Solarz visit was favorable.

Subsequently, Graenum Berger of the American Association met with Demeke the day after Thanksgiving. The latter again was forthcoming. One could get people out of Ethiopia, but in principle as Ethiopians rather than as Falashas. He asked Berger for a figure. The latter mentioned 50 to 75, a number apparently greeted with some relief as being within the possible.

There followed a meeting in New York between American Association leaders Berger and Edith Everett, Coopersmith and Solarz to discuss taking up the Ethiopian offer that Solarz could come in. The Congressman posed certain conditions:

---He would want written confirmation from the Ethiopian government as to the invitation.

---Since he no longer will be chairman of the African sub-committee of the Foreign Relations Committee of the House, there would be no reason for him to go to Ethiopia on government business. Financing therefore would have to be found; but this apparently poses no great problem. Others would accompany him as part of a delegation, according to the plan; and some names have already been bruited about. He then prepared a letter to the Ethiopian government which (Brant reports) "has been read by the Ethiopians and the Charge says it is a good letter."

Solarz has gone off to Asia for a tour and will be returning mid-January, so nothing can happen before then even assuming a favorable Ethiopian reply. In the meantime, it is alleged that the head of a major Jewish organization has contacted Solarz and indicated to him that he ought not be going to Ethiopia -- which some read as a sign that word has gotten back to the Israelis (one can even guess that Solarz may have checked with them) and that counter-pressure is now on.

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Inside Ethiopia, there still are 97 Jews in jail, picked up some three kilometers from the border when they tried to move out in an expedition that our friends claim was not organized by them. Intervention has been made on their behalf. The ORT teacher arrested in December 1978 still is in detention as well.

Actually, when one examines the movement one sees that relatively few Jews (about 52) have come out of the major Falasha center in Ethiopia, the Gondar region. The overwhelming number are from Tigre. This may reflect the fact that Gondar is under far greater Ethiopian control than Tigre, so that walking out from Tigre is easier. Late November one of the Falasha Kohanim was arrested in the Gondar region on charges of aiding movement but subsequently was released.

The estimate of the number of Falashas in various camps in the Sudan is thought to be about a thousand now. At the same time, American Association leaders assert that word has reached them that another 500-600 have come into the Sudan...but we go back to the old story that they will not say where. On the other hand, their estimates of a couple of years ago of some two thousand then being in the Sudan proved to be exact, so one may expect eventual confirmation of this group, too, if past experience is any criterion. There also are reports

of a handful of Falashas reaching Red Sea ports.

During the year, eleven Falashas in the Sudan are known to have died of infectious disease. Our friends sent in a doctor for a while, to do some rudimentary health work. ORT continues with its program; had a fascinating medical study done; and now is contemplating a feeding program for those in the schools. It has trouble getting, and sometimes getting in, personnel. The attempt still is being made to get funds from the U. S. under the terms of the Hickenlooper amendment, but whether this will work is not yet clear. Other governments continue to contribute substantially, under various conditions. ORT's JDC partner has upped its authorization-contribution by \$200,000 this year; but in fact this represents sums authorized by JDC but not turned over in previous years, over what was actually spent.

One of the contributing nations is Canada. This year, as last, its ambassador did a report on the Falasha situation quite favorable to ORT. His accounts of what is happening to the Falashas is substantially less gory than other accounts apparently reaching the recently formed Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews (which will be getting a substantial subvention, I believe, from the Canadian Jewish Congress), and which has expectations of bringing out another thirty or forty Falashas directly from Ethiopia in the not-too-distant future. Canadian relations with Ethiopia being better than those of the U. S., their chances for diplomatic intervention on behalf of migration are likewise better, as they see it.

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Given non-movement for the last two months of 1980, discussion about how to deal with the Falasha issue threatens to become stridently vocal again inside the Jewish community after the relative peace during most of the year. There is the threat of some supporters of the American Association to open an office to give wide general publicity to the issue, with the Israelis being presented as the villains in the piece. The basic argument of people like Graenum Berger remains that if there is no movement, it is because the Israelis do not want this. This of course is hotly contested.

Over and above this, communal interest in the fate of the Falashas remains high, and many communities are planning programs about the Falasha issue using, for instance, a new slide series presentation developed in Los Angeles. The question, though, remains: What do you ask community people to do once you have involved them in the issue? General publicity can be counter-productive to the on-going channel that has brought out nearly 700 during the past year, and perhaps to the Falashas inside the country as well. Is-

rael's critics claim they have shown that people can be brought out, and speak about going into business again for themselves in movement. This, though, not only would be precarious but would split the American community. The issue doubtless will be fought out at the forthcoming NJCRAC meeting in San Diego.

Our own policy ought be to continue to pressure the Israel authorities privately, so we know they do not relax efforts; to keep involved, as we are indirectly, with on-going negotiations with the Ethiopian authorities; and to try to help avoid any communal split that might lead to a general public brouhaha about the Falashas, given the potential danger in this.

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