

WHAT BEING JEWISH MEANS TO ME



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The Jews of Ethiopia, known as the Beta Israel, are one of the most ancient Jewish communities. They have lived in Ethiopia for at least 2000 years, isolated from the world Jewish community, but practicing their unique form of Judaism and yearning to return to Zion. With the founding of the State of Israel, they began to return. The vast majority of Ethiopian Jews were brought to Israel in Operation Moses (1984-85) and Operation Solomon (1991).

I was born in a small village in the Wogera region of Ethiopia. Though surrounded by dozens of villages, ours differed in one unmistakable way: On Friday, as the Shabbat approached, the people of our village would go to the river, immerse themselves in its waters, and return to dress in the special garments worn only on Sabbaths and holy days.

All week long, we ate skimpy meals, but on Shabbat our table was filled with the bounty of our region. My extended family -- aunts, uncles, and cousins -- would gather at the home of my grandfather, where we would eat and retell Bible stories.

When news first reached us that many Ethiopian Jews had made the trek across the Sudan and eventually reached Israel, I wanted to quit elementary school then and there and begin walking to Jerusalem. I remember saying to myself: "Why study now? We're going to Jerusalem anyway, and nothing exists there but the service of God."

In Ethiopia, gentiles referred to Jews as *falashas*, "strangers" or "aliens." As such we were restricted to certain vocations considered degrading in Ethiopia and were not permitted to own land. Two thousand years in Ethiopia did not bring acceptance! Only the hope and faith that we would return to Zion enabled us to survive centuries of discrimination.

Finally, in 1984, my mother, two younger brothers, and I left our village for the perilous journey. Traveling mostly at night to avoid the authorities, we were attacked by bandits and arrived at the border of Sudan penniless. After eleven days of waiting, we crossed the border and, two months later, weakened from malnourishment, we were finally home.

In Israel we met Jews from all over the world, many of whom, like my family, had fled their homelands seeking refuge and dignity. With them, we Ethiopian Jews have shared both the pain of exile and the joy of homecoming.

Whereas in Ethiopia I was not encouraged to question traditional beliefs or practices, in Israel I am free to think and develop my own understanding of being Jewish. I believe that God wants us to be honest, ethical, and compassionate, and to be responsible for each other. Our goal is a society based upon Jewish ideals of justice and caring for the needs of all its citizens. And I believe that God wants us to reach beyond ourselves to a concern for humanity.

Just like the early pioneers of Zionism, we Ethiopian Jews have returned to Zion "to build and to be built by it." The people of Israel welcomed us home and, in a relatively few years, we have moved forward on the road to integration. Yet, much remains to be done to remove every barrier to our full acceptance into Israeli society.

At the same time, we must dedicate ourselves to the ongoing challenge of *tikkun olam*, the repair of our deeply flawed, yet ever so promising world.

This is what being Jewish means to me.



The American Jewish Committee

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This is the seventeenth in a series on the meaning of being Jewish today. For information on a variety of programs that can help you explore your connection to Judaism, write: The American Jewish Committee, Dept. JCAD, 165 East 56th Street, New York, NY 10022, or call us at 1-800-551-3252.

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