ETHIOPIAN JEWISH ABSORPTION AND THE ISRAELI RESPONSE: A TWO-WAY PROCESS

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The major concern for Jewish Ethiopian immigrants has been their ability or inability to adjust and be absorbed into Israeli society. It has become increasingly apparent that what was missing in this approach was a view of the absorption process as two-directional. The purpose of this article is to analyze the Israeli responses to the Ethiopian immigration in order to demonstrate what they reveal about the values and behavior of Israeli society.

The data were collected from discussions and interviews with human services professionals (teachers, school counselors and psychologists, social workers and various absorption center personnel) around the country. The analysis is by emic category using the examples and explanations of the speakers as told in anecdotal form.

The findings indicate that the main problem in the absorption of Ethiopian immigrants may stem from Israeli ethnocentrism and not from the so-called 'primitiveness' and 'backwardness' of Ethiopian culture.

I

INTRODUCTION

In 1984, a story was published in an Israeli newspaper of very limited circulation, uncovering the government's clandestine efforts to bring Jewish Ethiopians out of Ethiopia and the refugee camps in the Sudan. It was reported that thousands of recent arrivals had been placed in absorption centers all over Israel. As a result of this information, a great many questions were raised by the media, government agencies and the public with regard to the problems of Ethiopian displacement and adaptation to a new culture.

It was apparent during this period that the interest in and concern for the absorption process of the Ethiopian Jews was, in fact, directed one way. Emphasis was focused on their adjustment, social interaction and ultimate absorption in Israeli society. What appears to have been overlooked was a view of the absorption process as two-directional. This paper attempts, therefore, to look at the Israeli respones to the influx of Ethiopian Jews and to analyze these responses for the purposes of (1) gaining insights into the values and behavior of Israeli society; and (2) suggesting ways in which those whose professional concerns involve them in the absorption process, can apply these insights.

II
THE EMIC CATEGORIES

The data were collected in the course of the writer's work throughout the country as an applied anthropologist. Interviews and discussions with human services professionals, teachers, school principals, psychologists, counselors, social workers and others in direct contact with Ethiopians produced information that allows for emic analysis. In other words, we take note of certain terms and phrases used by the interviewees who presented problems of their experience with Ethiopians in largely anecdotal form.

The terms and phrases lend themselves to categorization.

"*Primitiveness*". This term subsumes under it the largest number of problems. It is accurate to say that almost all problems are believed to derive, directly or indirectly, from the primitiveness of Ethiopian culture. The term is used to mean anything different and, by comparison, not as good. The issues of color and African origin strengthen the belief that the Ethiopian is a backward individual from a backward country with a backward culture. This belief is voiced early in any discussion of Ethiopians, usually in the context of the "technological gap". Stories circulating throughout the country cite examples of Ethiopian ignorance of modern kitchen appliances as evidence of their primitiveness.

"*Education*". School principals, school psychologists, counselors and teachers all tell the same stories of Ethiopian school children who "don't know how to hold a pencil". This example is part of a syndrome that includes the habitual tardiness of Ethiopian school children, inadequate dress ("They come to school in winter without even a sweater"), unkempt appearance ("Their noses are always running"), lack of necessary supplies ("They don't even have pens or pencils"), and insufficient lunches ("They'll come with half a loaf of bread and that's all").

Other problems mentioned are the failure of parents to respond to the school's invitation to visit teachers, a reticence on the part of some children to participate actively in the classroom, and unspecified learning problems with writing and arithmetic.

"*Personal Hygiene*". An almost unanimous concern exists over body odor, running noses and the menstrual cycle. Typical comments include (from a teacher), "I couldn't revisit a child's home because the smell was so overwhelming"; from a nursery school teacher, "I spend all my time wiping snotty noses and changing diapers"; from an absorption center counselor, "One day it was so bad (body odor) that when I went home after work I vomited".

No subject has received more attention than the menstrual cycle. Anecdotes abound about Ethiopian customs regarding the menstrual period and the problems it produces. Prominent among these is the use of closets for seclusion as a substitute for the so-called "menstrual hut" in Ethiopia. Ignorance of use of sanitary napkins and the *mikva* (ritual bath) complete the picture of a primitive people.

The quest for information about how this matter was treated in Ethiopia only increases the anxiety due to the highly personal and taboo nature of the subject. Attempts at teaching the correct hygienic procedure fail, and reinforce the stereotype of the Ethiopians as a backward people. A social worker told how she was aghast to discover used sanitary napkins on a lawn in an absorption center. "I told the women, in no uncertain terms, that this disgusting practice must stop!"

The concern and anxiety are accompanied by a sense of urgency not found in other areas. In one particular absorption center a counselor recounted how she and a nurse, with the aid of a male translator, lectured a newly arrived group of Ethiopian men and

women on the correct use of sanitary napkins. She added, "no one was embarrassed, except the nurse and me".

Recently, the writer was approached by a professional in the health field for help in designing a general health program for use in absorption centers. "The basic idea," he explained, "is to instruct Ethiopians on matters such as personal hygiene (how to wash under their arms), the use of sanitary napkins and birth control techniques." A short film on the body would be screened, including diagrams of the genitalia. When it was suggested that this was a taboo subject in Ethiopian culture, he responded by saying that the diagrams were "benign".

"*Religion*". The controversy over whether Ethiopians are authentic Jews continues among some religious and government bodies. The issue has serious implications in regard to marriage, burial and legitimacy of children. In the religious schools (where Ethiopian children are placed) the interest is more specific and less theoretical. Teachers ask why Ethiopian males do not wear *kippot* (skullcaps), do not put on *tefillin* (phylacteries) and are ignorant of the Oral Law.

Holidays such as Purim and Chanukah are unknown and thus are not observed by Ethiopians, though the sacrifice of the paschal lamb for Passover is practiced. The fact that the rules of *nidah* (pertaining to purity and impurity) and of the Sabbath are strictly observed according to Mosaic Law, further confuses the teachers.

"*Exceptionality*". This category is different from those previously discussed and is recognizable from the special importance that is placed on certain characteristics that, in contrast to the above-specified categories, are considered positive and highly desirable. Ethiopian pulchritude is universally acknowledged. Children, without exception, are described as "outstandingly beautiful", and "very cute". Individuals gush over the statuesque bearing of Ethiopians, the beauty of their teeth, hair and color. Indeed, one never hears of a homely Ethiopian or an unattractive Ethiopian child.

Excellence in the classroom is unequivocally and universally proclaimed. The Ethiopian student is held up as the cynosure for all students. Teachers wax enthusiastic when describing their young charges as "very bright", "quick learners", "highly motivated", "very well disciplined", and "models of deportment". One teacher exclaimed: "I have to force them to take their morning break and to go and play. They want to study all the time!" Another teacher expressed strong guilt feelings over not liking one particular boy whose demeanor was offensive and disruptive. Principals report arguments among teachers who all want to be assigned an "Ethiopian class". "We have no problems (with them)" is an oft-repeated evaluation.

"Ethiopian personality" has been characterized as nothing short of sublime and without blemish. Adults are said to be "co-operative", "no trouble", and "friendly with a good sense of humor". Problems are not attributed to Ethiopians *per se* but to the primitiveness of their culture.

III

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The belief that one's culture is the best and is to be preferred over all others is a universal form of ethnocentrism. Its function can be positive, strengthening the individual's sense of belonging and the group's *esprit de corps*. Ethnocentrism also

functions as a frame of reference from within which to evaluate other cultures, often resulting in value judgement and stereotyping. Additionally, there is an "ought" quality to ethnocentrism that, translated into policy, seeks, apriori, to change by fiat, social pressure or coercion those persons and groups that are judged to be different.

This definition of ethnocentrism is applied in the analysis of the data that follow.

The reactions to what has been termed the "technology gap"reveal a major theme in Israeli culture. Israelis perceive Israel as a modern, Western, industrial society. Moreover, it is a fact that most Ethiopians are peasants who have had no or little experience of living in a modern society. It should not be surprising, then, that Israelis express concern over the "technology gap". However, the intensity of the response and the accompanying pejorative humor imply something else. A distinct sense of incredulity is conveyed that indicates a deeper problem. Why, it can be asked, should this be so? A possible answer is that the problem lies not so much in Ethiopian peasant culture as in Israeli ethnocentrism. Thus, the real problem of Ethiopian peasant culture is compounded by a prejudiced belief that Ethiopians, for instance, will have great difficulty learning how to turn faucets on and off, flush a toilet, use a stove and refrigerator, correctly.

Would not the absence of ethnocentrism ameliorate the "problem", making it one of simple instruction? That this may be the case became evident in a workshop on "Ethiopian Culture and Israeli Ethnocentrism". In the course of a discussion of the "technology gap", a female psychologist concluded "that it probably is easier and would take less time to teach an Ethiopian immigrant woman how to use modern kitchen appliances than it would take me to teach my own husband".

The point to be gained, of course, is that recognition of one's own ethnocentrism casts the "problem" in a different light and consequently allows it to be treated in an objective way.

The same theme is evident in the field of education. Again, it is the amazement expressed over the fact that many of the children have "never held a pencil" that constitutes the more serious part of the problem. In one case, teachers of Ethiopian children were so astonished at the children's inability "to hold a pencil" that they overlooked the obvious, i.e., that all the children were in an age range, from four to seven, where developmental difficulties in physical dexterity are normal.

This ethnocentric mind set acts as a set of blinders and works in two ways: (1) producing stereotypical generalizations ("they don't know how to dress properly – wearing no sweaters in the winter") that (2) prevent insights into Ethiopian culture that would help the search for solutions to problems ("packing a school lunch" is not part of Ethiopian culture).

To understand further what is being said, let us look at some of the school problems reported by teachers. Difficulty in establishing contact with parents is a commonly-reported problem. Looked at from the teacher's perspective, it serves to prove that Ethiopian parents do not value education. How else, school personnel reason, can one explain unanswered notes, non-attendance at events and missed meetings.

What teachers and others fail to grasp is the need for an appreciation of Ethiopian history and culture in regard to this matter. It has long been established that all cultures practice some method for educating their members. Often the educational process is informal and takes place within the family network. What is taught in the home usually is reinforced under religious tutelage. Examples of this are disclosed in

talks with Ethiopians, who tell of the sacrifices made by many families whose children had to walk long distances to study under religious leaders in other villages.

Ignorance of Ethiopian culture is only one aspect of the problem. There remains another aspect that is equally noteworthy. Ethnocentrism not only encourages easy value judgements but, at the same time, restricts the individual's ability to appreciate how totally strange the Israeli educational system must appear to people from a culture where no such system is known. In on-going discussions with school personnel, it is apparent that they assume, without question, that the Western concept of formal education is either known or easily grasped by new arrivals, or should be known. It is difficult for teachers and principals to understand that the very basic concept of a school – a building in a physical location, organized by class according to performance level and age, and designed to follow a daily, weekly and yearly time-schedule – is bewildering to Ethiopian parents. The predictable outcome is frustrated Ethiopian parents who have scant understanding of the course of action expected of them on behalf of their children. Added to this are problems of language and the myriad demands of a large and complicated bureaucracy. This predicament leaves Ethiopians parents profoundly perplexed over what to do, and thus they often do nothing.

The question of how to introduce change into the system requires a more detailed explanation than can be given in this paper. Consistent with what has been set forth, however, is the need for some in-service training to promote a first-step awareness on the part of school personnel of the nature of the problem. The idea is to outline the basic problem and then encourage innovative solutions on the part of school personnel. In a number of such in-service workshops conducted by the writer and a school psychologist, teachers and administrators were eager to participate in finding solutions to the problem, using the culture concept as a tool.

Our findings indicate that once the cultural variable is presented and discussed it is easier for a breakthrough to occur in the group's ability to think of possible ideas and plans of action. Knowledge of the Ethiopian conception of education led to the idea that home visits by the teacher, as opposed to visits to school by parents, would be beneficial for both parties. This idea is particularly appealing because, in many cases, the teachers live in or near the development towns in which the absorption centers are located. Additionally, there is the advantage that several families can be visited in the total context of the absorption center.

Ethiopian parents approached in their homes responded in unanticipated positive ways. During one such visit, teachers were surprised when Ethiopian parents requested information about their children's school performance and expressed an eagerness for involvement. This was an important lesson in itself. In reply to a principal's criticism that children come to school unprepared, "without books, lunch, etc.", a number of the parents stated: "We didn't know. Nobody told us. We don't know where to buy school supplies". In a later discussion of this incident, the teachers acknowledged their surprise and pleasure at the interest and determination shown by the parents.

Needless to say, we are dealing with the tip of the iceberg. It may be enough to point out the paradox of a seemingly easy solution to a serious problem. What is meant by this is that when this case is related to other teachers in other workshops, the inevitable response is: "Of course, it makes sense. We should be sensitive to the culture of others". The fact remains, however, that prior to the workshop the record shows a no-action pattern.

Few values are stronger and more resistant to change than those which have a religious base. This is particularly true in traditional peasant societies. In general, a group's ethnocentrism is supported by its religious beliefs. For Ethiopian Jews, the issue is exacerbated by the question of the authenticity and origins of their Judaism.

Our discussion is focused specifically on the practical implications, as they are acted out in the absorption centers and the religious schools attended by Ethiopian children. Here, more than in any other area, the previously mentioned "ought" quality of ethnocentrism is operative. Ethiopian religious practices are seen as not only different but in some sense in conflict with the religious laws of the school and the State. Behavior according to the Halacha (religious code of law) is demanded and Ethiopian children are required to conform as one way of "helping" them to assimilate and to become "true" Jews. For example, soon after their arrival in Israel Ethiopians are given Hebrew names without being given any real explanation. Some attempt is made to link the new name with the Ethiopian name phonetically, but more often the choice of name is arbitrary.

It should not be necessary to point out the importance of an individual's name and the possible psychological implications of a sudden name change. The motivation behind it may be more closely related to Israeli prejudice than to the "official" explanation that name changes aid in the assimilation process. A comparison with the experience of other immigrant groups proves this point. To cite a personal example, when the present writer immigrated to Israel, the question of a name change was never raised, though his given name is neither Hebrew-sounding nor has Biblical roots.

Use of the culture concept in treating this issue offers different kinds of opportunities for approaching the problem. For example, it would be better to involve the Ethiopian community by contact with its leaders. In such a forum an exchange of information could take place about the naming customs of both groups. Israelis would learn that for historical reasons Ethiopians favor names such as Gideon, Judith, and Esther. Proper forms of address could be explained. In Ethiopian culture an adult is addressed as "Mr. Gideon" and not by his family name, as is the custom in Israel. To use the Israeli form is considered discourteous and insulting, because it denies adult status to the individual.

A secondary effect of this approach is that other kinds of cultural information are shared, increasing each side's knowledge of the other's culture and enhancing rapport.

Ethnocentrism and ignorance of Jewish history prevent understanding of the relationship between Ethiopian religious ritual and customs and contemporary *Halachic* practice. Once this shortcoming is demonstrated, greater tolerance becomes possible. It is then less difficult to understand why Ethiopians, upon their arrival in Israel, refused to eat hot food on the Sabbath. It is also then clear that wearing a *kippa* (skullcap) and putting on *tefillin* (phylacteries) are *mitzvoth* (commandments) required by Oral Law and not known to Ethiopian Jews. On the other hand, the sacrifice of the paschal lamb for Passover is an Ethiopian custom in keeping with Mosaic Law. Thus, the odd, strange, and "non-Jewish" practices of Ethiopian Jews can be appreciated as a testimony to their perseverance in retaining their faith.

CONCLUSION

It has been suggested in this paper that of the many problems facing Ethiopian Jews in their absorption into Israeli society one, in particular, has been short-shrifted. We have attempted to demonstrate, albeit impressionistically, that the problem lies in the

ethnocentric response of Israelis to Jewish Ethiopians and not necessarily in the assumed primitiveness of Ethiopian culture.

What this situation bodes for the Ethiopian Jews' future in Israel is hard to tell. It has been suggested, however, that applied effort by human services professionals can influence and change Israeli behavior. Basically, this means designing in-service training programs utilizing case histories, simulation exercises and role-playing to enable those who work with Ethiopians to recognize their ethnocentrism and how it causes them to stereotype and evaluate Ethiopian behavior. "Turning the light inward" is the phrase that best exemplifies what is meant, and this is a skill to be learned through application in the field. Our experience thus far indicates that, given time, professionals find this skill useful in their work.

To date, the emphasis has been on daily travails. Little has been done, to the best of our knowledge, to go beyond the immediate pressures of current problems. It seems necessary to anticipate future problems and to prepare for them now. Special attention, for example, should be paid to recently-arrived young children. This has not been done so far, *inter alia*, due to what we have identified as the "honeymoon syndrome". In this early stage, teachers speak of problem-free classroom, as a result of a form of ethnocentrism that romanticizes the behavior and performance of Ethiopian children. It is our impression that the "honeymoon" will soon end and that teachers need to be prepared for the reality of children with more than the usual range of developmental, psychological and cultural problems. Many of the compliant, orderly children of today, we predict, will soon evince learning problems (and how will we diagnose problems in the absence of culture free tests?,, psychological problems caused by separation from family in Ethiopia and the trauma of the refugee camps, and cultural problems (Ethiopian norms and values will eventually surface, to the surprise of school personnel and others). It is not difficult to envisage teachers of pre-teen and teen-age Ethiopian students lamenting the demise of the "good old days" and asking, "What happened, they used to be so wonderful?"

Children are part of a larger family unit. The family situation needs closer scrutiny in order for professionals to be better informed about what appears to be a rapidly growing gap between the children's success in assimilating and the parents' inability to keep pace. Role reversal is taking place, as parents are forced to rely on their children to act as cultural brokers in Israeli society. In our attempt to teach parents how to work with their children in cooperative endeavors such as educational games and puzzles, it is painfully apparent that the children are embarrassed to have to explain to their parents how to play dominoes or Lotto. The parents, too, are embarrassed over their inability to take the initiative.

This problem is made more serious by the general non-conscious tendency to accept the loss of the parental generation as an unavoidable and foregone conclusion. Yet, many of these parents are still in their twenties and thirties, and the loss will be disastrous in personal and human terms. A possible corrective can be found in a program that seeks to identify leaders and potential leaders in this parental group. We have personal knowledge of such individuals; meanwhile, unfortunately, they are

languishing in absorption centers, along with their fellow immigrants, becoming bored, disenchanted and alienated.

The history of Ethiopian Jews is marked by two basic experiences that are important in any prognosis for the future. One of these is their heritage as rulers and successful warriors. The other and more recent experience has been that of exile, *Falasha*, in their own country, where they were pariahs, feared for their demonic powers, despised for their occupations, and subjected to forced conversion. Out of these experiences, Ethiopians have developed coping mechanisms to enable them to survive.

It is worth discussing how these mechanisms operate in the absorption of Ethiopians into Israeli society. Perceptiveness, as a finely honed skill, enables Ethiopians to sense quickly what is wanted to them, especially on the non-verbal level. In discussions, Ethiopians point out, for instance, "that sometimes you need to be loud to get what you want in Israel". It is not easy for an Ethiopian to be "loud", because in Ethiopian culture, to be "loud" is considered impolite. Proper etiquette requires a quiet demeanor. Despite this, Ethiopians have learned that under certain circumstances one must "talk loud" in order to succeed.

Ethiopians possess a strong sense of dignity and independence (the ruler-warrior experience) and are also resilient and pragmatic (the *Falasha* experience). The sense of insult to their Jewish dignity and pride explains the increasingly adamant refusal to undergo ritual circumcisions. In other areas, e.g., dress, Ethiopians appear eager to emulate modern Western styles.

In the political realm, Ethiopians have developed a strong sense of group consciousness for public consumption, and have been able to speak in one voice on their own behalf. It has become rare to see or hear a non-Ethiopian claiming to represent Ethiopians, though not too long ago this was the norm.

The brief examples offered are meant to illustrate areas in need of future research. Ethiopian absorption will continue – the question is, "How will Israeli society respond? "