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# Ethiopia And Israel

by Haggai Erlich

**R**elations between Ethiopia and Israel constitute a subject of varied importance, too rich and too delicate to be rendered scholarly justice within the scope of a brief survey. I have elaborated these in some detail, and tried to analyze them conceptually, and in modern historical perspective, in my recently published book Ethiopia and the Middle East. (Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder 1994.) I shall confine myself to a few generalizations in the hope of promoting mutual awareness and advancing a clearer dialogue between the two countries.

Roughly speaking, contemporary relations between the two states can be divided into three periods. The first, the more intensive and, indeed, the formative period, culminated in the 1960s, during which time Ethiopia was considered by Israel as an important strategic asset. This ended in late 1973, with Emperor Haile-Selassie breaking relations with Israel in the midst of the Yom Kippur War, and only a few months before he was deposed by the Dergue. The second was the period when Mengistu's regime was in power, which was marked by strategic disconnection between the two states, as well as the emergence of the Falasha issue as a central factor in their relations. The third period consists of contemporary relations with an initial, tentative stage marked by some mutual disillusion.

Looking back over these past forty years of contacts, however, major achievements have been scored in

various fields, to the great benefit of both sides. However, as it shall be argued hereunder, Ethio-Israeli relations were never, in fact, dialectically harmonious.

## Haile Selassie's and Ben-Gurion's 'Periphery Strategy'

**T**his first period began quite tentatively in the early 1950s. It gathered some momentum in the aftermath of the 1956 Suez war with the strengthening of Israeli economic input and presence on the Ethiopian scene from 1959 onwards. This period culminated in the 1967 Six-Day War when relations, for a while, reached the stage of a strategic alliance. However, as it was evidenced by their sudden collapse in 1973, Ethio-Israeli relations were fragile. They were based, it seems, on essentially mutually-contradictory concepts.

On the Israeli side, the basic understanding behind its policy towards Ethiopia can be said to have been pragmatically strategic. The biblical-historical connection, which was a central issue for the Ethiopians, was untypical of Israeli attitudes. Ethiopia, a historical entity of significance to Islam, and to some extent, even to the emergence in the 1930s of modern Arabism, had had little to do with the emergence of the Jewish-Zionist movement. In 1935, for example, when, amid the 'Abyssinian Crisis', the destiny of Ethiopia was much on the agenda of the

Christian as well as of the Muslim-Arab world, this aroused little interest in the Jewish-Zionist community in Palestine. It was only in 1941, when Orde Wingate, a British officer who had been a chief architect of the future Israeli Defense Forces, led the guerrilla campaign in Ethiopia to reinstate Haile-Selassie in power, that Ethiopia was placed on the Israeli agenda. It was, indeed, to remain there as part of the Israeli strategic thinking, which was primarily focusing on survival in the Middle East. In that respect Ethiopia became important for two reasons. First, Ethiopia was expected, starting from the 1950s, to help Israel outflank the Arab military siege. Second, Ethiopia's survival and progress was conceived in Israeli eyes as a step in the building of a pluralistic Middle East, thereby promoting the idea of a multi-cultural region accepting non-Arabs, rather than denying their existence. In 1959, Prime Minister David Ben Gurion formulated the 'periphery strategy' through which Israel began working on a Turkish - Iranian - Ethiopian - Israeli alliance. Ethiopia, in that context, was a major promise, yielding also an additional benefit: her centrality in continental Africa.

Hungry for global recognition and diplomatic partners, Israel of the 1960s invested in Africa beyond her means. In Ethiopia, she exerted maximum efforts in this regard. In fact, as of the beginning of that decade Israel sent to Ethiopia the best of its experts in a variety of fields - security, education, communication, agriculture, health, economic planning et cetera. When Israel's victory in the Six-Day War relieved Ethiopia of an acute sense of Arab siege, the Israeli diplomatic community in Addis Ababa grew to become the second largest mission abroad after New York. In 1969 Israel offered Ethiopia to modernize the Ethiopian armed forces pending the signature of a secret treaty. Courting Ethiopia culminated that year in Israel enabling Ethiopian monks to break the status quo in Deir a-sultan monastery, in the now reunited Jerusalem, and to retrieve the rights they had lost in 1834. At the same time, and in the service of its strategic interests, the Israeli government shelved the Falasha issue. While a very vocal effort was made to 'save Soviet Jewry', the matter of the Beta Israel in Ethiopia was never really raised forcefully with Haile-

Selassie. The Israel of the 1960s was ready to ignore part of her own ethos in order not to embarrass the Emperor, and not to endanger the delicate Ethiopian connection. On the contrary, the more the revolt in Eritrea, led at the time by the Islamic and the Arab-oriented ELF, escalated, the more the Israeli interest to support Ethiopia and its modernization grew.

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Israeli activity in Ethiopia of the 1960s was executed in a spirit of enthusiasm, in line with the pioneering spirit of a young state. But, in essence, this work stemmed from a concrete set of interests, and was far more pragmatic than romantic. The Ethiopians, however, on their part, acted more in the shadow of historical legacies. They approached the Israeli connection with greater sensitivity and vulnerability, wavering inconsistently between over-expectation and extreme-caution.

The State of Israel meant much more than just an interested neighbour to modern Ethiopians. The biblical-Christian heritage, coupled with the Ethiopian-Zionist ethos, apparently created a sense of deep-rooted proximity. It was magnified by the Ethiopian traditional yearning for a powerful non-Muslim ally, ready to come forward in the event of an Ethiopian-Islamic confrontation. These legacies of Ethiopian Christian tradition, and of Ethiopian history, seem to

nave led many members of Haile-Selassie's elite to entertain high expectations. They expected Israel to be ever-strong and ever-resourceful. Indeed, after the Six-Day War victory, Israeli advisers and experts were provided access to nearly all most sensitive facets of Ethiopia's life. In addition, Israel was expected to be ever-generous and ever-considerate, as if within the context of a family. Based on such an assumption Haile-Selassie's Ethiopia expected the Israelis to understand and accept Ethiopia's policy towards the Arabs. Part of this policy - itself a matter outside our scope for consideration - was to scrupulously avoid anything the Arabs might possibly consider provocative. Thus, when the UN voted in November 1947, favouring the partition of Palestine and the creation of Israel, Ethiopia abstained.

Then, for the next fourteen years Haile-Selassie refused to recognize Israel *de jure*. Later on, even at the height of fruitful co-operation, Ethiopia failed to appoint an ambassador to Israel. Practical relations that could be described as extensive, beneficial, and carried out in a very friendly, even intimate atmosphere, were conducted in utmost secrecy. Ethiopia never agreed to a formal alliance, nor to Israel's offer to modernize its armed forces and intelligence services. At the UN General Assembly and at OAU meetings, Ethiopian diplomats occasionally took the lead in denouncing Israel. In private, however, Israeli officials were reassured time and again, that this was the character of sophisticated diplomacy in the face of the Arab threat, and that nothing could possibly damage the Ethiopian-Israeli historical bond and common destiny. There is, indeed, enough evidence to suggest that when Haile-Selassie broke relations with Israel in the middle of the Yom Kippur War, he really expected Israel to understand it in a brotherly way.

### **Mengistu and the Strategic Marginalization of Ethiopia**

The price paid by Ethiopia for this action was heavy. Again, there is no space here to digress on the immediate implications of the measure. For one

familiar with the details, however, it would be hard to imagine the emergency of the Dergue, the rise of Mengistu and his ruffians and their hijacking and brutalizing of the Ethiopian revolution had Israeli advisers remained in 1974 in their positions. In any event, in 1975 a new chapter in the history of Ethio-Israeli relationships began. Major Mengistu reinvited back into Ethiopia the Israeli military experts; and Israel, without insisting on resumption of official relations, acceded to the request. Motivated by the fear that Ethiopia would collapse, and that an 'Arab Eritrea' would then emerge, Jerusalem sent experts to help build a new Ethiopian army. Twelve such advisers, failing to grasp the meaning of their efforts, did, indeed, build the new Flame Division, and some auxiliary units, which eventually helped Major Mengistu progress down the road to dictatorship. In the face of what was considered in the mid-1970s, as an Arab-Eritrean threat and the 1977 Somali invasion of the Ogaden, the Israeli establishment continued to help Mengistu. Such help continued even after Mengistu had consolidated his Soviet connection. In February 1978 when a frustrated Foreign Minister, Moshe Dayan, exposed the scope of Israeli aid, Mengistu expelled the Israelis altogether and broke the connection once again.

The rest of the Mengistu period was characterized by profound change. Israel lost much of its strategic interest in Ethiopia. Part of this has to be attributed to Mengistu's Soviet connection and to American expectations from Israel not to deal with such a dictator. However, other more pragmatic considerations emerged. First, Ethiopia and the whole of the Red Sea theatre lost - at least for a while - some of their importance. In 1979 the breaking out of the Iran-Iraq war shifted the strategic interest away from the Eritrean-Ethiopian-Somali conflicts and drove it to the margin of the Middle Eastern arena. Second, the Camp David accord of the same year and the signing of a peace treaty between Egypt and Israel reduced the value of Ethiopia in Israeli eyes. In accordance with the speculation that Africa was lost to Israel diplomacy after 1973, Mengistu's expulsion of Israelis and Ethiopia's entry into the Soviet camp introduced a new factor into the matter. Israel began

dealing directly with the Arab world. Her old 'periphery strategy', failing not only in Ethiopia but also in the now Khumainist Iran, was rendered obsolete. Yet Israel refrained from slamming the door on Ethiopia by not succumbing to Egyptian pressure to return the keys of Deir a-sultan to the Egyptian Coptic monks. She tried to maintain some contact mainly because the Falasha issue had begun gathering momentum.

After the expulsion of the Israeli experts by the Dergue in 1978 and the other developments mentioned, Ethiopia nearly vanished from the ever-busy Israeli strategic agenda. In the 1980s, issues like the war in Eritrea, the famine and the cruelties of the regime in Addis Ababa, continued to interest the Israeli public and news media. But these were seldom, if at all, matters to be dealt with by decision-makers. Immersed in other endless, pressing issues, the various branches of the Israeli government simply ignored Ethiopia. The only Ethiopian matter that was to be aired in government and security services was the issue concerning the Falashas.

Here again space is too sparse to render justice to such a delicate subject. Various reasons were behind the fact that the Falashas, nearly ignored in the 1960s, became so important in the Israeli mind of the 1980s. Some of the reasons had to do with developments among American Jewry and with their dialogue with the Israeli public: the nature of the new Addis Ababa regime and the new Likud government of Menachem Began in Israel and its somewhat renewed interpretation of the biblical-Jewish heritage behind modern Zionism. No lesser a background factor, it appears, was the UN resolution of 1975 equating Zionism with racism. This resolution, undoubtedly, had far-reaching implications for the Israeli mind and, at least subconsciously, was still a factor behind various Israeli attitudes. When the 1984-85 'Operation Moses' ended with the air-lifting to Israel of a half of 'the Black Jews of Ethiopia', this was greeted with a sense of euphoric elation in Israel.

Here at last was an Ethio-Israeli issue which was, from the Israeli conceptual view-point not a matter of

pragmatical strategy but one which went right to the very essence of the traditional Jewish and the modern Zionist soul. In the late 1980s, committed to the effort to redeem the Beta Israel of Ethiopia, even a Labour-run Foreign Ministry was ready to be on a collision course with the US State Department. For, when Mengistu, as of 1988, frustrated and angered even the Soviets, he turned to Israel. In response, Jerusalem hurried to resume diplomatic relations and, very tentatively, to restart the dispatch of some military aid to Mengistu. This was done for no other reason than the spiritual-national cause of bringing the Falashas to the Jewish homeland against the central strategic interest of a smooth dialogue with Washington. When 'Operation Moses' of 1991 brought the rest of the Falasha community to Israel, it met again with an elated public immersed in biblical emotions.

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Fortunately, 'Operation Moses' ended with a blessing for Ethiopia as well. In 1988, when Mengistu approached Israel, he expected it to come forward with assistance on the scale of the 1960s. Captive of old concepts, he took Israel for granted and presented an arms request of unrealistic magnitude. He presumably believed that Israel would get involved directly in his wars, or at least rebuild his demoralized forces. Nothing of the sort was considered. Out of fear for the Falashas, the majority of which were already gathered in Addis Ababa, the dictator was furnished with some token help and samples of available bombs. As the EPRDF forces began closing in on Addis Ababa, Mengistu was still negotiating on arms-for-the-Falashas issue. It was against this

backdrop that the US government hurried to intervene; and it was probably due to ensuing American diplomatic involvement that Mengistu decided to flee, instead of trying to make Addis Ababa his own Stalingrad.

### **Towards Sober Cooperation and Regional Pluralism?**

The period which began with the rise of the new government in Addis Ababa is still too recent to be seen in perspective. Surely, its initial phase can be described as one of mutual disillusionment.

Ethiopia's strategic importance, in concrete, immediate terms, continued to be reduced in Israeli eyes. In the early 1990s, Israel began negotiating with Syria, signed an agreement with the PLO and made peace with Jordan. It was fully immersed in a process of historical reconciliation with key countries of the Arab Middle East. The whole idea of a 'periphery strategy', at least in terms of outflanking rivals, could be hardly expected to reappear. Ethiopia's importance as a key to African diplomacy and commerce was also eroded because of the low Israeli expectations from the continent as a whole. The euphoric sentimental days of 'Operation Solomon' are also over; and more apparent are the enormous difficulties in absorbing the Falashas into the dense texture and hectic pace of Israeli life. Moreover, the newly created problem of the so-called Falasha-Mura (Christian Ethiopians of recent Falasha origin, some with close family connections with Falashas in Israel) is being aggravated mostly because of internal Israeli politics. Most unfortunately, it has found place at the centre of the stages marring relations between the two states.

On the Ethiopian side, disillusionment stems from the whole issue of the emigration of the Falashas and the new Falasha-Mura question. Israel is also remembered in Ethiopia, rightly or not, as a supporter of the previous regime. The scope of Israeli assistance, immediate interest and involvement in various fields, is, on the whole, disappointing.

After some forty years of mutual acquaintance - and of relations with mutual benefits and problems - it is time

to redefine expectations. Israel should be more sensitive to the Ethiopian soul, more considerate of the Ethiopian needs to co-exist with the Arab-Islamic world on terms long molded by Ethiopian history. She must also be more understanding of the cultural-religious and, indeed, the national sensitivities aroused by the Falasha story. Above all, Israel should redefine its defunct 'periphery strategy' and work towards helping Ethiopia join what is hoped to be a 'new Middle East'. If the struggle over the future of the Middle East is between those who want to recreate it as a region of monolithic identity (Arab-Islamic), and those who work for making it a region thriving on its inherent pluralism, then Ethiopia, including the new Eritrea, should be redrawn into her old oriental world. Ethiopians, with their culture and history, always belonged to the Orient. They are related by languages, religions, politics, as well as by assets like the Nile waters and commerce on the Red Sea. Orthodox Islam (as I have elaborated it in my afore-mentioned book) to distinguish it from Radical Islam, is, by no means, hostile to Ethiopia. Indeed, the modern Middle East can, and should be, receptive to Ethiopia and ready to help her. This includes the new Eritrea, with its new horizons and its promising future. For Israeli diplomacy, the promotion of this Ethio-Middle Eastern re-engagement is a major challenge of far-reaching importance.

Ethiopians, on their part, have to be considerate of the Israeli-Jewish cover behind the Falasha story. They should also redefine their needs from Israel. For good or ill, the happy days of the 1960s are not likely to return. But Israel can still be of central importance in Ethiopia's foreign relations. Israel is still resourceful in ways relevant to Ethiopia's modernization; and relations of mutual benefit in a variety of fields should be further encouraged. But, in a larger sense, Ethiopia and Eritrea must, above all, see Israel as a partner in a new Middle East, a friend interested in their rejoining the Orient, and doing so without losing their unique identity and their African soul. In the spirit of the old intimate proximity between the two nations, Ethiopia and Israel should join hands in promoting pluralism, at home and in regional relations.