

THE NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY (NACOEJ)
Brief History of Ethiopian Jewry

Jews have lived in Ethiopia for at least 2,000 years. They call themselves Beta Israel, "Of the House of Israel." Non-Jewish Ethiopians refer to them as "Falashas," a derogatory term meaning 'landless', or 'outcast'.

For the last few centuries, Jews in Ethiopia were the poorest of the poor, precluded from owning land. So, most Beta Israel men became sharecroppers, metal workers or weavers. Beta Israel women made and sold pottery, bowls, plates and jugs.

Members of Beta Israel were isolated from world Jewry for most of their history. Beta Israel religious traditions predate rabbinic law, and were based on the five books of Moses and the books of the Prophets. Later holidays, such as Chanukah, were unknown to them.

Ancient Abyssinia and Biblical Cush, present-day Ethiopia, were composed of many tribes. In the tenth century, an estimated 250,000 Jews, led by Queen Yehudit, established Jewish rule over a sizable area. After a few centuries, the Christian King Yitzhak (1413-1430) defeated the Jews, scattered them and declared them "Falash," denying land ownership to all non-Christians.

Wars of persecution continued until King Susenyos (1604-1632) utterly conquered the Jews. Subsequently, the Jews dwindled from war, famine, disease and intense Christian missionary activity.

At the end of the 19th century, French professor Joseph Halevy traveled to Ethiopia to establish contact with this ancient Jewish community.

In the twentieth century, Dr. Jacques Faitlovitch, a student of Halevy, brought two dozen young Beta Israel to Europe to educate them in yeshivas (Jewish religious schools) so that they could return to Ethiopia as teachers.

In 1956, the State of Israel established diplomatic relations with Ethiopia, and the Jewish Agency was permitted to open schools for the Beta Israel in Ethiopia.

In 1973, Israeli Chief Sephardic Rabbi Ovadia Yosef officially recognized Beta Israel as Jews. In 1974, a Communist revolution overthrew Ethiopian Emperor Haile Salasse. Jews began to escape from Ethiopia.

In the 1980's, thousands of Jews fled famine and oppression, escaping to Israel via Sudan. About 4,000 perished in the attempt. NACOEJ undertook covert relief and rescue efforts in Ethiopia.

In 1984-85, the exodus via Sudan culminated in Operation Moses, a clandestine airlift of about 8,000 Jews to Israel. The secret mission was organized by the CIA, Israel Defense Forces, U.S. Embassy and Sudanese forces.

In 1991, 14,500 Beta Israel were airlifted in Operation Solomon from Ethiopia to Israel over the course of 36 hours, on 41 flights. This was the culmination of years of semi-legal and legal departures, in which NACOEJ had participated. Three NACOEJ staff members participated, leaving Ethiopia on the last flight.

During Operation Solomon, several thousand Beta Israel were left behind because they were Falash Mura, Beta Israel whose parents or grandparents had made pro-forma conversions to Christianity in times of starvation. They were still viewed as Beta Israel by themselves and by their non-Jewish neighbors.

Since 1998, several thousand Falash Mura have made aliyah, while about 7000 remain in Ethiopia. They lead observant lives, and are recognized as Jews by leading Reform, Orthodox and Conservative authorities.

NACOEJ provides food, education, employment and religious facilities to the remaining Jews. In 2010 the Israeli Cabinet voted to bring the remaining Falash Mura to Israel. However, aliyah remains slow due to limits set by secular Israeli authorities.

Over 120,000 Ethiopian Jews now live in Israel. Absorption is difficult for these immigrants, as they have little education and few job skills. However, they are highly motivated to become productive citizens in the land of their centuries-long hopes and dreams. Thousands of Ethiopian children, teens and college students receive educational help from NACOEJ, enabling them to succeed.

For more information on the Beta Israel and Falash Mura, please contact NACOEJ at (212) 233-5200, or visit the website at www.nacoej.org.