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Israeli and Jewish Institutional Reactions to the Falasha Immigration after 2004

Resumé

Réactions des institutions israéliennes et juives à l'immigration des Falashas après 2004

La fin de l'année 2004 constitue une étape importante dans l'histoire de l'immigration des Falashas en Israël. Les membres du Knesset adressèrent alors au premier ministre Ariel Sharon une pétition dans laquelle ils demandaient l'accélération de l'accueil des Juifs éthiopiens et de leur insertion dans la société israélienne. On y postulait l'augmentation du quota d'immigration des Falashas de 300 à 1000, ou au moins à 600 personnes par mois. En février 2005 un groupe spécial fut formé, réunissant entre autres les ministres de l'intégration, des finances et des affaires étrangères, qui avait pour but de surveiller l'observation des critères permettant l'installation en Israël. Malgré les efforts entrepris pour abréger les procédures de vérification et pour établir un plan qui permettrait d'achever le processus d'immigration en 2 ou 3 ans, celui-ci se prolonge jusqu'à ce jour. Le présent article décrit les différentes causes de cet état de choses : l'instrumentalisation du problème des Falashas dans la politique intérieure courante, les difficultés de conversion au judaïsme, la résistance des chefs religieux orthodoxes, les difficultés d'adaptation des immigrés dans la société israélienne (p.ex. la formation de ghettos noirs scolaires et religieux), la vision stéréotypée des Juifs noirs etc. On y présente aussi la réaction des organisations juives internationales à la politique discriminatoire du gouvernement israélien vis à vis des Falashas dans le contexte de son attitude envers les immigrés venant d'Europe et de l'Amérique.

1. Acceleration of the Falasha Immigration to Israel

The end of 2004 marks a new stage in the history of the Falasha. At that time 61 Knesset members signed a petition which was sent to the Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, demanding acceleration in the process of bringing the Falasha to Israel¹. In this letter the parliamentarians demanded the rejection of the policy of “allocations and numbers” and postulated the increase in the amount of the Falash Murah coming to Israel from 300 to 1000, or at least 600 people per month. It was one of the main postulates of the Jewish organisations as well as that of the Immigration and Absorption Committee of the Knesset. The petition was handed to the Prime Minister Ariel Sharon the day before the planned discussion on this topic with the participation of all the relevant state organisations and institutions. However, it turned out that the discussion was postponed. The reason for this was the change of personnel in the position of the Minister of Interior and the Minister of Absorption. Thus, the planned demonstrations organised by the Ethiopian Jews who already lived in Israel, were called off. In a statement issued by the Ministry of Interior one could read that the system of gradual bringing of the Falash Murah to Israel would not be changed.

However, in the beginning of February 2005, the Israeli government decided that by the end of 2007 there would be some 20,000 Falasha brought to Israel². A special unit was created, which included ministers for immigration, treasury and foreign affairs. Its task was to investigate whether applicants for the immigrant status had the proper entitlement. Origin and religion were two main criteria permitting them to settle down in Israel. Prime Minister Sharon expected that within a period of three or four weeks there would be sketched detailed plans of receiving and absorbing the next groups of the immigrants.

The above mentioned issue of *Haaretz* states that from 1999 on some 15,000 Falasha have been living in camps in the vicinity of Addis-Ababa and Gondar and waiting for the “complete repatriation to Israel”. It should be remembered that in 2003, upon the decision of the government, all those who had Jewish mothers were allowed to come to Israel. At that time the legal entitlement to the Israeli citizenship was also verified. The decision taken by Ariel Sharon’s government allowed an increase in the membership of the special unit which was responsible for

¹ *Haaretz*, 23-12-2004.

² *Haaretz*, 01-02-2005.

proper leadership of the verification process and for the accomplishment of this process even within 2 months, if possible. It was also decided to double every month the number of the Falasha who underwent this verification process, from 300 to 600 people.

The decision was met with enthusiasm from the Falasha who were already residing in Israel. However, A. Ngose, head of the organisation called *MeKanaf Drom LeZion* when referring to the government's decision expressed his disappointment that it was not decided to finalise the process and to bring all the remaining Falash Murah still awaiting in Ethiopia. In the opinion of Tzipi Livni, then Minister of Absorption, the decision was very important as it should have initiated significant budget changes and led to some extra funds made available for the preparation of a proper absorption process. The decision was also welcomed by Zionist organisations not only in Israel but also, among others, in the USA. Unfortunately, the decision has never been put into effect.

According to the statistical data of the Ministry of Absorption, in June 2005, when the decision was due to become law, 300 Falash Murah arrived in Israel: in July 303, in August 302 and in September 440.

On October 30, 2005, in front of the Prime Minister's Office in Jerusalem there was a demonstration whose participants demanded that all the Jews should be allowed to come to the Jewish State³. This appeal referred mostly to the Ethiopian Jews. As stated above, eight months earlier Ariel Sharon decided to increase the monthly rate of the Falasha coming to Israel. This was a response to the pressure from the Jewish circles, including the Chief Sephardic Rabbi, as well as from some international personalities, for example from the former Canadian Minister of Justice. The most important target of the decision was the will to shorten the time of the immigration procedure. When the decision was taken there were still some 18,000 Falash Murah waiting in the camps or living in villages in Ethiopia. Initially, the operation was planned to end in 6 years' time. By doubling the monthly immigration rate of the Falash Murah to 600 souls this period would be shortened to 2-3 years. In the face of the drastically worsening living conditions in Ethiopia (poverty, famine, and AIDS epidemic) the implementation of the decision had a key meaning. It should be remembered that in February 2003, it was

³ "Let my people in!" Supplement to *The Jerusalem Post*, 02-11-2005.

Sharon's government that decided to bring all the Falasha from Ethiopia. Why now they did not want to fulfil their promises?

Professor Shlomo Mayaan from the Hadassah University in Jerusalem is of opinion that the people waiting many years in the camps, or persons individually applying (as it happened in the Gondar region) for the verification process, and for obtaining the immigrant status, which could enable them coming to Israel, are three times more vulnerable to AIDS than those waiting only one year or less. Maayan's research has shown that among those who waited for departure to Israel for less than one year only 2,3% were infected with the HIV virus. Among those who waited up to two years – 2,8% were infected. However, in the case of those whose verification process lasted three years or more the number increased up to 10,2%. The problem is important as most people waiting in camps eventually come to Israel and only there do they start the treatment process. This causes an increased number of infected people in Israel and requires greater financial means for medical services in the country. Research led by Professor Maayan showed that 6,3% of women and 5,8% of men, who are newcomers from Ethiopia, happened to be HIV positive.

A change in the bureaucratic verification system could bring a solution to this problem. It would be much safer to lead verification procedures in the villages without the necessity to stay long in poor sanitary conditions in the camps, in which – according to the statistic data – some 20,000 Falasha continue to live.

Sources close to the Ministry of Absorption excused the delay in the implementation of the government's decision with the unstable interior situation in Ethiopia. However, it should be kept in mind that the election in that country was held in May 2005, and won by Meles Zenawi, so there was no change in the Ethiopian politics. In November 2005, the Israeli media informed the public that after completing his fact-finding mission, the Director General for Africa in the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs described the interior situation in Ethiopia as "stable". The result of this positive evaluation was that the Minister of Foreign Affairs, S. Shalom, together with the representatives of the Ethiopian Government decided to resume the repatriation of the Falasha to Israel at a rate of 600 souls per month. Under the pressure from the demonstrations mentioned above, Minister Shalom

declared also that the whole process of bringing the black Jews to Israel should be completed by the end of 2007 or at the beginning of 2008. This situation gave a new vigour to the activities of the Zionist organisations and aid agencies. The renewed action to take the Ethiopian Jews to Israel was called "Operation Jonah" referring thus to the Biblical prophet as well as to Jonah Bogale, the Jewish leader from Ethiopia in times of the "Operation Moses".

2. Campaign to Improve the Image of the Falasha

Governmental institutions started a social campaign to improve the image of the Ethiopians in the eyes of the Israeli public, the cost of which was estimated at 1,3 million shekels. This campaign started on the 30th anniversary of the beginning of *aliyah* from the countries of Eastern Africa⁴. It was believed that during the campaign there would be a series of press articles and television programmes presenting the Ethiopian success stories. The aim of such action was not only to change the image of the Falasha but also to contribute towards the improved integration of the Ethiopian immigrant communities into the Israeli society. The decision to embark on this campaign was brought about by the difficulties faced by the Ethiopian immigrants when they wanted to become full citizens of Israel. This view was shared by Tzipi Livni, Minister of Foreign Affairs, who at the same time was responsible for the Ministry of Absorption. Zeev Bielski, head of the Jewish Agency, supported this opinion by reasoning that the engagement of State and society should not be stopped on a day when 100,000 Ethiopian immigrants have already come to a new homeland.

Icchak Dessie, head of the Tebeka Centre, highlighted that the recent image of the Ethiopian immigrants in the eyes of the Israeli public was totally negative. This campaign was necessary as there was a clear need for a positive perception. However, he was not sure as to whether this campaign would solve all the Falash Murah's problems. In his opinion it was most important for Ethiopians to attain high and influential positions in the society. According to the Tebeka data, 60% of Falasha with a university degree were unable to

⁴ *The Jerusalem Post*, 14-02-2006.

find a job corresponding to their level of education. The majority of them were forced to accept blue-collar jobs such as security guards.

Jacob Ben Shimon, Deputy Mayor of Petach Tikva and one of the organisers of the Empowerment for Ethiopian Youth programme explains that the difficulties encountered by the Ethiopian immigrants to Israel are caused by the fact that these immigrants, as opposed to other immigrant groups, come from a culture which does not encourage or promote education.⁵ According to statistics of the Municipality of Petach Tikva, in 2006 out of 700 Ethiopian families only 9 young people attended high school. From general statistics⁶ it can be deduced that only 17,7% of the Ethiopian students complete their high school education at the University entry level compared with 48% of the entire population, and 19% of the Falash Mura finish high school education at all compared with 50% of the population at large.

A similar programme of educational encouragement for young Ethiopians has been initiated by the University of Tel Aviv. Within the framework of the Thinking Science Programme graduates of the University meet the local Falash Murah community, encourage young people to continue their education and provide them support lessons in Hebrew, English and Mathematics.

Dov Ohayon, Regional Director in the Ministry of Absorption, considers the situation of the Ethiopians in Israel to be very difficult. Within the first 2-3 years they not only have to learn a new language, but also, in the majority of cases, complete the process of conversion, find a job and a place to live. That is why a proper education could ease their adaptation, in both the social and professional environments.

Unfortunately, situations often arise when the conversion process is denied through the religious authorities. It happens so in cases when the Ethiopian students attend secular classes. This was the case of a group of 40 students of Jezreel Valley College. When justifying their decision the argument put forward by the Rabbinical Court was that the Sabbath was not observed in the dormitories where the stu-

⁵ *Metro*. Supplement to *The Jerusalem Post*, 03-03-2006.

⁶ *Central Bureau of Statistics Bulletin*, 2003.

dents lived. According to the opinion of some activists from the absorption organisations, the religious authorities maintain a very hostile policy towards the immigrants who cannot obtain the Israeli citizenship without receiving a certificate of completion of the conversion process. The newspaper *Haaretz*⁷ published statistics according to which out of 181 young Ethiopians who had completed preparatory courses for conversion in period from the beginning of 2005 until April 2006 only one person received the certificate of completion. Interviews with young Falash Murah show that servants of the Rabbinical Courts controlled the lifestyle and living conditions of the new immigrants by, for example, reproaching them for not observing prayer times and not accepting the fact that secular duties do not allow them to pray three times a day.

As a result of the decision taken by the Chief Sephardic Rabbi, S. Amar, who recommends to accept the Falasha as full Jews on condition they complete the process of “returning to Judaism”, many schools and courses were established to assist and prepare the Ethiopian immigrants to undergo this process. One of these courses was *Kedma* (“Moving Forward”) led by the Jewish Agency for the conversion process. The course organisers also admit that the policy of the Rabbinical Courts displays a hostile attitude towards the Ethiopian Jews, treating them *a priori* as harbouring negative feelings towards their new homeland. However, activists of the Jewish Agency explain that this lack of enthusiasm for the Jewish life among young Falasha is fully understandable because they live in limbo for years without receiving any confirmation that they are suitable to become citizens of the State of Israel. In spite of the fact that the preparatory course for the conversion process was extended from 10 to 12 months (as desired by the religious courts), full readiness of the participants of these courses for conversion is being questioned. Many politicians (including M. Melchior from the Labour Party) and social activists put the blame for failure of the conversion system on the rabbinical servants. These servants claim that the small number of immigrants obtaining the conversion certificates is a result of the lack of the budget allocation for their proper preparation.

⁷ *Haaretz* 27-04-2006.

During operations Moses and Solomon many Ethiopians were brought to Israel in accordance with the law aimed at uniting the immigrants' families. This situation necessitated a great deal of bureaucracy. Those who were responsible for the formalities shared the opinion that this bureaucracy created a false impression among the Falasha concerning their new life in Israel. This referred to a straightforward and unproblematic adaptation to life in a new country, and to a false sense of acceptance and being part of the new society. The counter argument to this was that the Falasha themselves did not give a true account of their life in Ethiopia, and most of all they did not reveal their true reasons for coming to Israel. They could not explain how close they were to the Jewish religion and culture. There were many cases where newcomers gave false information concerning personal details and their family situation in order to satisfy the Israeli authorities.

Falasha immigration to Israel has been backed by all Zionist organisations, particularly those in the USA. On the way to their new homeland the immigrants encounter many obstacles such as the absorption costs and especially the question of who is entitled to receive the new immigrant status⁸. 300 Ethiopian immigrants coming to Israel every month receive the Israeli citizenship. They are entitled to a course in Hebrew and 90% of the new accommodations' costs. This leads to a conviction that the Falasha were coming to Israel for purely economic reasons. Subsequently, there would be a non-stop stream of the Ethiopian immigrants to Israel. This was undoubtedly one of the reasons behind the decision to freeze plans aimed at bringing all the Falash Murah to Israel by the end of 2007. The disappearance from the political arena of Ariel Sharon, the main architect of those plans, did not help the situation.

⁸ *The Jerusalem Post*, 21-02-2006.

As stated above, the Ethiopian immigration to Israel has been strongly supported by the USA activists who in this particular wave of the *aliyah* see the essence of Zionism. This immigration has also a humanitarian aspect and fulfils the need for social justice, which is particularly popular among the younger generation of its supporters. On the turn of 2005, a group of leaders of the American-Jewish organisations, mainly from the United-Jewish Communities, visited Ethiopia on several different occasions. As a result of one of those visits “Operation Promise”⁹ was started in February 2006, the aim of which was to provide 160 million USD worth of aid to the most needy. Of this amount, 100 million was meant to be allocated to the Ethiopian *aliyah* and the remaining 60 million to the elderly people, particularly those coming from the former USSR.

3. Criticism of the Governmental and Institutional Actions towards the Falasha

Representatives of the absorption organisations, who studied the Falasha’s situation before they had arrived in Israel, claimed that the Israeli government did not assign enough funds for the preparation of the new immigrants for living in Israel. In such a way the government contributed to creation of the “generation of parasites”.¹⁰ In the opinion of the American-Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (AJDC), professional courses and all the preparations should be done in Ethiopia, where the Falasha ought to undergo the verification process. Such arrangement would enable them much easier adaptation in Israel. Unfortunately, the government refused to allocate funds for this kind of projects, even though detailed plans were already accepted by different bodies, including governmental institutions. In the 2006 budget the Israeli Ministry of Finance set aside an additional 45 million USD to accelerate the immigration process from Ethiopia. However, no concrete steps were undertaken.

⁹ This operation was organised in co-operation with the Israeli Ministry of Absorption and the Jewish Agency. One of the requirements of this operation was the need to sponsor the bringing to Israel of a few small groups of the Falasha.

¹⁰ *Haaretz*, 29-05-2006.

When we discuss the financial matters, then some problems always arise: how many Falasha still remain in Ethiopia, how many are willing to come, and how many of them can legitimately apply for the entrance to Israel. According to the representatives of the Ministry of Interior currently working in Ethiopia, it is impossible to state, even approximately, how many people are waiting for the departure to Israel. In the case of the Falasha, it is very difficult to prove their Jewish origins, and in most cases it even is not possible. For this reason, recently the Law of Return was only sporadically used as the basis for the immigration. In case of the Falash Murah immigration it is more feasible to use the Law of Entry which regulates the arrival to Israel of the family members of the Israeli citizens (family unification regulations). It is estimated that among the immigrants from Ethiopia some 30% are Christians. They travel to Israel to join members of their families who became already the Israeli citizens.

It was no coincidence that the criticism of the indolence of the Israeli government became intensified in the period just before the parliamentary elections of 27 March 2006. The newspapers were reflecting the concerns of their readers who questioned the essence of the Zionist idea and of the Jewish State. They could not tolerate the situation when more than 20,000 Jews were waiting in very poor conditions for coming to the homeland: the homeland which could not decide whether to accept its children and to allocate sufficient means for their settlement. The problem of insufficient funds evoked the greatest controversy.¹¹ To put this problem in a proper perspective, the examples of the previous large immigration waves were brought: the emigration wave of 1950s, the Yom-Kipur War wave, and the most recent wave from the former Soviet Union. The readers used to ask why a different standard was applied to the Ethiopian immigrants in the situation when Israel over the latest 10 years welcomed more than 250,000 Russian non-Jews, claiming that the descendants of those immigrants would one day become the true Israeli citizens.

¹¹ *The Jerusalem Post*, 15-03- 2006.

Once the excitement connected with the election process had died down, and the new government undertook its duties, it turned out that these pre-election promises were not taken seriously. In the opinion of the Interior Minister, R. Bar-On, bringing the rest of the Falash Murah from Ethiopia to Israel is not the government's priority, and the delay in the immigration process is by no means dependent only on the lack of funds.¹² Minister Bar-On stated that the implementation of the previous plans concerning the Ethiopian Jews would cost the State budget some 4 billion shekels, and at the time being the State could not afford it. The same Minister reduced the number of the Falasha qualified in the verification and preparation processes from 17,000 to 10,000 souls. Contrary to its earlier declared obligations, the government rejected the demand to increase the pace of the Ethiopian immigration. The Minister of Finance, A. Hirschson, expressed concern about the costs of the future increased immigration from Ethiopia. He also asked for a postponement of all decisions in this matter until the debate over the budget for the following year was completed. He reasoned that the main problem was not the costs of bringing the Falasha to Israel but the long term fixed costs once they arrived. Minister Bar-On added that even though the budget could cover the costs of bringing them to Israel, it would not solve the problem of the Ethiopians. They remain too long in the absorption centres which not only increases the costs of their *aliyah* but also slows down, and in some cases makes impossible the assimilation of them into the Israeli society. Therefore, according to the Ministers the debate should not concentrate over the absorption but rather on money having been squandered.

Minister Bar-On referred also to one of the most serious problems, which is being caused by schools attended by the Ethiopian immigrants.¹³ In many cases, especially in the suburbs of the large cities, these schools become "Ethiopian schools". One has to refer to the increasingly common phenomenon: schools admitting a large number of the Ethiopian students are being abandoned by their "white colleagues". This situation leads to the creation of the real black ghettos whose members are more and more unable to escape

¹² *The Jerusalem Post*, 21-06-2006.

¹³ Interview with Bar-On, *The Jerusalem Post*, 27-06-2006.

and join the mainstream of the Israeli society. Such a situation also increases the absorption costs of the immigrants.

Bar-On referred also to his meeting with the representatives of the Ministry of Absorption and of the Jewish Agency. They were asked whether they could find some additional means in their institutional budgets to cover the costs of bringing all the remaining Falasha to Ethiopia as well as the costs of the absorption process. The immediate response was that it would not be possible. Thus, in the opinion of the Minister of Interior one should use common sense and bring as many immigrants as it is possible for the Jewish society to absorb.

The ghettos' problem does not confine itself to schools as it appears also in synagogues. The new immigrants from Ethiopia are looked at with great suspicion as far as the character of their Judaism is concerned. Very often they are excluded from the religious life since they cannot participate with others in all parts of the service. In the opinion of S. Mula¹⁴ from the Jewish Agency, the problem of ghettos and religious isolation is very common. He believes that the proposed solution of opening separate synagogues with a modified or simplified liturgy does not bring the desired effects. On the contrary, it further separates the Falasha from the rest of the society.

Governmental decisions have usually been met with a severe criticism. For example, Zeev Bielski from the Jewish Agency did not agree to the financial limits and to the arguments justifying them. Critical voices were coming from the American side. Activists from the Jewish organisations in the United States used to emphasise the lack of interest of the State of Israel in bringing the immigrants from Africa. They considered the actions of the government to have a racist colouring and rejected the financial argument since they believed that the volume of the absorption costs was highly overestimated. The activists were also surprised to learn that there was not enough means in the budget, even though the increased rate of the immigration from Ethiopia was planned well in advance and the

¹⁴ Shlomo Mula was the first Ethiopian to become a member of the World Zionist Organisation Council and Director of the Anti-Semitism Department of this institution.

preliminary decision was taken in 2005. In such a situation the argument of the unexpected costs should not be raised at all.

Few organisations supporting the Falasha in Israel put forward the question of the discrimination practices, which were directed against the Ethiopian Jews by some official bodies. Such practices are clearly visible when they are looked at from the perspective of the European (particularly French) and North American immigration, which was strongly encouraged. According to a common believe it was the duty of the Israel to take care of all the Jews, irrespective of their origin or their material status. During a meeting with Minister Bar-On, the representatives of the Jewish organisations once more tried to get an answer concerning the possibility of doubling the rate of the immigration from Ethiopia but it was of no avail.¹⁵ However, all agreed that the “Operation Promise” was ineffective¹⁶, and that this opinion ought to be forwarded to the Prime Minister Olmert with the hope for the change of the government’s stand. The Minister for Absorption, Z. Boim also did not support Bar-On’s policy claiming that even though the Falasha are not Halachic Jews, one should not abandon the decisions and recommendations of the Prime Minister Sharon in 2005.

Rejection of the Government’s obligations towards the Ethiopian immigrants was also condemned outside Israel. I. Cotler, former Canadian Minister of Justice and fighter for human rights clearly stated that the Israeli government limits and even violates the basic rights of the Falasha, especially the right to return to Israel. It is also contrary to the earlier decisions, which were approved by the Supreme Court. In Cotler’s opinion, this was the only case in the history of Israel when the government impeded the Jewish immigration. It can be treated as a social injustice, inequality in law, and even racial discrimination. Never in the history of Israel bringing the Jews to the homeland, one of the philosophical bases of the existence of the State, was dependent on the allocation of the financial means. Minister Bar-On’s decision was also against the previous agreements

¹⁵ *The Jerusalem Post*, 28-06-2006.

¹⁶ By July 2005, of a planned \$100 million only \$60 million had been collected: *The Jerusalem Post* 9-02-2006.

with the Jewish organisations, especially those from the United States, which voluntarily took upon themselves the responsibility of gathering an extra money for the Ethiopian Jews. I. Cotler once again pointed out the stark difference in the position between the very active policy of the government towards the immigrants from other (especially European) countries and the prejudice towards the Jewish immigrants from Africa.