

The Status of Ethiopian Jews

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This paper was adopted by the CJLS in 1986 by a unanimous vote of thirteen in favor (13-0-0). The names of the voting members were not recorded.

שאלה

Are the Falashas, the Jews of Ethiopia, considered to be Jews according to halakhah?

תשובה

In 1985, Rabbi David Bleich published a rather mean-spirited responsum¹ in which he argues that the Falashas are not to be considered Jewish, and must undergo conversion after an appropriate period of instruction. As we shall see Rabbi Bleich's responsum is predicated upon a misunderstanding of the importance of the early sources, an incomplete understanding of the historical origins of the Falashas, and a fundamentalist understanding of the origin of black people. This is a mean-spirited responsum, in my opinion, because much intellectual energy has been spent trying to discredit the Jewishness of these people without any attempt whatsoever to put them and their practice of Judaism into an historical perspective.

Eldad's Account is Quasi-Mythological

Rabbi Bleich begins by citing the classic responsum of Rabbi Zemah b. Hayyim, the Gaon of Sura. This is the earliest known report concerning the Falashas, and in the responsum the Gaon endorsed the account of Eldad HaDani, a ninth century merchant and traveler (died 890 in Cordova). Some scholars believe that he was a Yemenite who, as his name indicates, associated himself with the tribe of Dan.² Eldad wrote about the lost tribes of Israel and in this specific story, he told about how the tribe of Dan had migrated to Ethiopia, and with the help of the tribes of Naftali, Gad and Asher had established an independent

The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly provides guidance in matters of halakhah for the Conservative movement. The individual rabbi, however, is the authority for the interpretation and application of all matters of halakhah.

Jewish state. Eldad embellished his tale of the “sons of Moses” who lived in Havilah by recounting that they were cut off from the rest of the world by “Sambatyon,” a river of rolling stones and sands. This impassable barrier stopped only on Shabbat when it was surrounded by fire and covered by a cloud. It was possible to communicate with these people, “the sons of Moses” but it was impossible to cross over. Eldad’s story was endorsed by Rabbi Zemaḥ and later by Rashi, Rabad and Avraham b. Maimon. The endorsement was never universal with some notable exceptions taken by Ibn Ezra, and the Maharam of Rotenburg.³

Rabbi Bleich in a rather out-of-character jaunt into the historical dimension of halakhah, comes to the startling (from his perspective) but obvious (from our perspective) conclusion that Eldad’s report is a quasi-mythological tale. For Rabbi Bleich, the mythological quality of the account amounts to a total discreditation of the source. Rabbi Bleich, however, ignores the modicum of truth which the source does hold. There apparently were Jews in Ethiopia who were isolated from the rest of the Jewish world. Scholars suggest that the purpose of the tale was to raise the morale of Rabbi Zemaḥ Gaon and his community by giving them news of lost tribes of Israel who lived in freedom.⁴

Independent Jews in Ethiopia

About 300 years after Eldad, Benjamin of Tudela, a Spanish entrepreneur and traveler, reported that on the opposite side of the Red Sea from Yemen “there are Jews who are not subject to the rule of others, and they have towns and fortresses on the tops of mountains.”⁵ Again, scholars are of the opinion that Benjamin’s reports are hearsay, but again there is an awareness of the fact that Jews were living in Ethiopia. Another 300 years elapsed before Elia of Ferrara related that in 1438 he “met a young Falasha in Jerusalem and was told how his co-religionists preserved their independence in a mountainous region from which they launched continual wars against the Christian emperors of Ethiopia.”⁶

These persistent reports about Jews in Ethiopia point to three important facts: (1) The Falashas were a distinctly identifiable group who have been living in Ethiopia isolated from the rest of the Jewish world for many centuries. As we shall see, the Falashas pre-date either the Moslem or the Christian presence in Ethiopia. (2) The Falashas considered themselves to be part of the Jewish people despite the fact that they were physically cut off from them. (3) Many leaders of the Jewish community regarded them as Jews. Items (2) and (3) are about perception and self-perception. The accuracy of these perceptions will be evaluated in light of the nature and the practice of Falasha Judaism.

Racial Questions

The next objection to the Jewishness of the Falasha raised by Rabbi Bleich is racial.

Clearly, according to the Midrash the blacks are descendants of Ḥam and not Shem, and though it is not a genetic certainty that a black may not be a descendant of Shem . . . nevertheless the Mishnah *Bekhorot* 65a is quite clear that dark skin color is a disqualifying blemish in a person. The Rabbis quite seriously considered the possibility that a black child might be born of the seed of Israel and would be disqualified from the priesthood by virtue of his color . . . In accordance with the Midrash which states that blacks are the descendants of Ḥam, clearly, it is impossible to argue that an entire black tribe could actually be the descendants of Shem, possessing such a disqualifying blemish, at least, from the priesthood . . . In conclusion, it seems reasonable to postulate that the Falashas are not the descendant of the tribe of Dan.⁷

This type of argument, though appropriate and understandable for the Midrash, Mishnah and Gemara, is hardly worthy of being seriously argued again. Rabbi Bleich need not have strained himself to simply arrive at the conclusion that the Falashas are not the racial descendants of the tribe of Dan. The best scholarship freely recognizes the quasi-mythological character of Eldad's report. Furthermore, there is little doubt that the Falashas come from the Agau tribe, of Ḥamito-Cushitic stock. They are not Semites or ethnic Jews. In ancient times, there was no such thing as ethnic exclusiveness among Jews. Like the Khazars, the Falashas were converted to Judaism. How they were converted and by whom is open to scholarly debate. Some argue that the Jews of Elephantine in the 5th century B.C.E. had a profound influence on these people. Through a process of cultural diffusion from Egypt into North Africa combined with local evolution Judaism was embraced by this native population.⁸ Other scholars argue that the Jews of Yemen may have sent missionaries who converted the African tribes to Judaism.⁹ Having read the evidence on both sides of the issue, my inclinations tend toward the first explanation. I am certain, however, of one thing: from the early days of the early Axumite Empire, reaching back perhaps to the time when it fell under the influence of the Ptolemaic Pharaohs, 200 B.C.E. to the present day, these brave people have remained a separate identifiable group. Their courage in the face of persecution and in the face of overwhelming odds stands proudly with every Jewish community that has ever fought for its identity and its religion. I had supposed, albeit incorrectly, that Rabbi Bleich would respect a record as heroic and as remarkable as that of the Falashas.

Are They Karaites?

The Falashas are not only Hamites, argues Rabbi Bleich, they are also Karaites. Although the Radbaz probably had very little real knowledge of the Falashas and their origins, he did write something quite interesting and important about them.

Those who come from Cush are without doubt the descendant of the tribe of Dan. Because they were unexposed to Rabbinic Judaism, they practice a pre-rabbinic form of Judaism based on Scripture. But were it only possible to teach them rabbinic tradition, they would not reject it. They are very much like a Jewish child taken captive amongst the gentiles. Realize that Zadok and Boethus lived during Second Temple times. The tribe of Dan was exiled before that time. And even were we to be in doubt as to the exact time period of that exile, it would still be a Mitzvah to redeem them. Concerning issue of personal status, I must assume that their marriages are valid and that their divorce proceedings are not in accord with Rabbinic practice, because they are ignorant of the rabbinic laws of marriage and divorce.¹⁰

In another responsum, the Radbaz wrote:

Cush is in a perpetual state of war. There are three kingdoms: Moslems, Christians and Jews of the tribe of Dan. As best it can be determined, they are descended from the sects of Zadok and Boethus i.e. they are Karaites, for they have no knowledge of the oral law.¹¹

The Radbaz does seem to be a little unsure about the Karaite influence among the Falashas. As we have already noted, the Falashas are the indigenous Jews of Ethiopia and their presence predates that of both Christians and Moslems. One scholar has argued that there were Falashas even before the destruction of the First Temple in 587 B.C.E.¹² The Radbaz, in his first responsum is quite correct in denying any connection between the Karaites and the Falashas. Although each practices a form of pre-rabbinic Judaism, they do so for very different historical and ideological reasons. Radbaz was and is also correct in stating that these people are eager for Rabbinic guidance and instruction in the Oral Law. Unlike the Karaites who chose to deny the authority and work of the rabbis, of their own free will, the Falashas are like a child taken captive by gentiles and raised without any communication with the Jewish people. Furthermore, an exhaustive study comparing the Falasha practice with rabbinic law, on the one hand, and Karaite law, on the other, was made by A. Z. Eshkoli.¹³ His conclusions are interesting and important:

In general, their customs follow the Book of Jubilees, whose sectarian origin is itself an open question. For it is neither Zadokite nor Pharisaic and yet, there are customs (of the Falashas) which do not originate in the Book of Jubilees and which point to the remnants of a unique tradition. This tradition has more affinities with the Pharisaic tradition as we have it than with Zadokite tradition as we know it. Be it as it may, there is no doubt whatsoever that the Falashas are not Samaritans. This contention is simply nonsense especially when applied to a group of Jewish people (the Falashas) for whom the holiness of Jerusalem stands at the center of all its religious aspirations, for whom the books of the Prophets are as holy as the Torah itself. Nor are they Zadokites. So long as we remain ignorant of the sectarian origins which are at the center of those issues which separate us from them, and so long as we remain unable to sort out the original lines of thought from the distortion, assimilation and foreign influence in which they are mired, we must conclude that their (the Falashas) tradition is closer to Pharisaic law as it was developed in its earliest period, perhaps even before there were actually Pharisees. Only with this assumption in mind is it proper to approach their tradition for the purpose of revealing the sectarian foundations which may conflict with the Pharisaic Legacy in our hands.¹⁴

Loyal to Teachings of Moses

Undeniably, the almost total isolation which the Falashas experienced denied them the opportunity to bring their understanding of Judaism into line with the ideas developed in the rest of the Jewish world. It laid them open to fossilization, assimilation and to the missionary activity of the Christian Church. But the historical record shows that these people displayed and continue to show remarkable loyalty to their faith and traditions. It is a poor reward, after zealously maintaining their loyalty to the teachings of Moses and heroically withstanding persecution for something like 2000 years, to be told by rabbis, like J. David Bleich, that they are not recognized as members of our people.

Falasha Judaism

An admirable summary of Falasha Judaism is found in Volume 6 of the *Encyclopedia Judaica* in an article written by M. Wurmbrand on which the following remarks are based.

1. The central tenet of their theological system is the belief in one God, the God of Israel, who has chosen his people and who will send them a messiah to redeem them and return them to Israel.

2. The central focus point of religious life is the *Mesgid* or the synagogue which is found in every village and where seven prayer services are held daily. Among the pious, Shabbat and festivals are totally devoted to prayer.

3. Shabbat is rigorously observed and all work stops at midday Friday when all purify themselves by immersion. According to M. Wurmbrand, who did an extensive study of the *Teezaza Sanbat*, the book of Shabbat commandments, “the *Teezaza Sanbat* does not permit even one of the 39 *מלאכות* *אב* which are prohibited on Shabbat. Even though it has no knowledge of the list of *מלאכות* in the Mishnah Shabbat 7:2, it seems least our *מלאכות* *אבות*... Certain types of work prohibited by the Mishnah are explicitly mentioned (in the *Teezaza-Sanbat*) i.e. field work, baking of bread, hunting, ritual slaughter, carrying from one domain to another.¹⁵ In addition, the kindling of fire, the drawing of water, going beyond the city limits and sexual intercourse are prohibited. It also appears that the Falashas observed the Shabbat even while at war and fought only if attacked. In the synagogue, a section of the Torah in the form of a book is read in Ge’ez and explained in Amharic.

4. The Falashas use a lunar calendar to determine their holidays and the year begins in Nisan, not Tishri.

5. On *Pesah*, they sacrifice a paschal lamb and eat only unleavened bread for seven days. *Shavuot* is celebrated on the 50th day after the last day of *Pesah*. The first of Tishri is New Year’s day and the tenth of Tishray is a fast day observed as the Day of Atonement. From the 15th to the 20th of the month is *Sukkot*. The Falashas do not, however, build a sukkah, use a lulav or an etrog. From the first of Av until the seventeenth of Av is a period of fasting commemorating the destruction of the Temple. The fast of Esther is also observed.

6. Falashas pay meticulous attention to the laws of cleanliness and purity. Their wives separate themselves from their families during menstruation and return only after immersion. A man undergoes purification after touching somebody or something unclean.

7. The Torahitic laws of ritually clean and unclean animals are observed. They do not eat raw meat and remove the sinew of the femoral vein. Ritual slaughter is carried out by a priest and they do not eat meat slaughtered by Christians. They wash their hands before eating and recite blessings before and after the meal.

8. Circumcision of boys is done in accordance with Torahitic law on the eighth day after birth.

This brief summary of Falasha practice points to the fact that their ritual observances, their belief in one God, the God of Israel, and the centrality of the people and the land of Israel in their thinking is *כנוהג ישראל*.

Maintained Separate Identity

In one final argument, Rabbi Bleich contends that the testimony of the Falashas themselves in which they claim to be Jews is unreliable and unacceptable. Should someone come to us and claim to be Jewish, we must have some tangible proof to this effect. According to Rabbi Bleich, as he extrapolates it from the sources, the judgment should be made on one or all of the following considerations:¹⁶

1. Some knowledge of Hebrew. The Falashas have none.
2. Observance of all the mitzvot of the Torah including, of course, the Oral Law. The Falashas have no knowledge of rabbinic practice and law.
3. The observance of the law must find its motivation in the existential commitment of the individual to Judaism and not by virtue of these practices being common to society in general and observed by all. In Ethiopia, the Falashas and the Church share many common customs and beliefs including circumcision and a belief in the holiness of the Torah.

The Falashas have shown extraordinary fortitude in their determination to remain a separate identifiable group. Their success is all the more remarkable considering that they have not had the support of the Talmud. Further, the Falashas appear never to have used Hebrew in their liturgy which is commonly believed to be an essential ingredient in the ability of a people to sustain their identity. In this sense, the Falashas are extraordinary as compared to the Chinese Jews of Kaifeng-fu, for example, whose holy books were written in Hebrew. When due to their isolation, they forgot Hebrew, and lost access to their literature, their Judaism subsequently dissolved into ignorance.¹⁷ The Falashas kept their practice and their beliefs intact because they could read their texts in Ge'ez, a local liturgical language. Certainly, Hebrew language is an important binding force for our people, but the language is not a goal in and of itself in this respect. The language is a vehicle or a mechanism designed to maintain group identity and coherence. Against overwhelming odds and without the benefit of Hebrew language, the Falashas have maintained their identity and the integrity of their beliefs. Although, in dress, they are indistinguishable from their fellow countrymen, and although they grow the same crops and raise the same cattle as their neighbors, they, unlike their neighbors, are also artisans-blacksmiths, weavers, tanners and basket makers. The Amharas, the Christian ruling group, like the Arabs on the other side of the Red Sea, hold handiwork and craftsmen in contempt.¹⁸ The Falashas are tolerated, but very much unloved by their countrymen, and so the Falashas live in ghettos and have suffered from accusations ranging from witchcraft to decide, the doctrine that they killed Jesus.¹⁹ In the case of the Falashas, knowledge of Hebrew can no longer be the sole criterion

by which we judge an individual's claim to being Jewish. Such a contention would probably exclude the claims to Jewishness of a large number of Reform, Reconstructionist and assimilated Jews and a number of Conservative Jews. It might also allow Jews for Jesus and other cults to pass as Jews, if they could demonstrate some knowledge of the language. Surely, a person's beliefs and practices should carry more importance than a knowledge of Hebrew.

Similarities to Ethiopian Christianity

No one practices all the mitzvot, that is even assuming that we could agree on what all of them were. The Falashas observe Shabbat, kashrut, purity laws, holidays and daily prayer. They believe in the God of our ancestors and they look to the land of Israel as the land of redemption. Yes, they do so in a pre-rabbinic fashion, but the basic practice and the basic theological beliefs are there. Furthermore, they deny Christianity and Islam and are most serious and anxious to learn about and observe the Rabbinic interpretations of biblical Judaism. I only wish that our own congregants were as serious and observant as are these people.

Finally, to address Rabbi Bleich's last point. From scholarly discussions it is believed that Judaism in Ethiopia predates either Christianity or Islam. Jewish customs and beliefs had a very significant influence on Ethiopian Christianity. The conversion of the royal house to Christianity in the 4th century effectively prevented Judaism from becoming the official religion of the Abyssinian kingdom.²⁰ The similarities of practice between the Falashas and the Christians is a tribute to Judaism from which so much was borrowed. These shared practices have not prevented the Church from shunning the Falashas, from ghettoizing them, from persecuting them, from trying to convert them. In America, Jews of all persuasions use the formula "the Judeo-Christian heritage." In all truth, this cliché is devoid of any real religious truth and functions more as a political statement which gives us, Jews, an equal share in the marketplace of ideas and morality. In Ethiopia, there really is a Judeo-Christian heritage, because Christianity as practiced there has so much more in common with Judaism. We must remember, however, that the integrity of the Falashas and their practice has not been compromised.

Falashas are Jews

On 9 February 1973, the Chief Sephardi Rabbi of Israel wrote a letter of historic importance. Basing himself on the Radbaz and on his student Rabbi Yaakov Kastro, the Chief Rabbi ruled categorically that the

Falashas were Jews. He also mentioned a number of prominent rabbinical authorities, including Rabbis Hildesheimer, Kook and Isaac Herzog who shared his opinion. He wrote:

I have decided that in my humble opinion, they are Jews who must be saved from absorption and their assimilation. We are obligated to speed up their immigration into Israel and to educate them in our Holy Torah, making them partners in the building of our land. And the sons shall return to the Holy Land.

I am sure that government institutions and the Jewish Agency, as well as organizations in Israel and the Diaspora, will help us to the best of their ability in this holy task that you have taken upon yourself – the mitzvah of redeeming the souls of our people. For whoever saves a single soul in Israel, it is as though he had saved a whole world.

CONCLUSION

Be it resolved that we members of the Law committee add our voices to that of the Chief Rabbi in affirming the Jewishness of this courageous people, the Falashas of Ethiopia. “May God bring back our brothers from Assyria, from Egypt, from Ethiopia and from the isles of the seas and that the scattered ones of Israel and may the dispersed ones of Judah all be gathered together from the four corners of the Earth. May they all come and bow down before the Lord on the sacred mountain in Jerusalem.” Amen.

NOTES

1. J. David Bleich, “The Problem of the Falashas,” *Or Hamizra*, vol. 33, sec. 3-4, 1985, pp 235-253.
2. David Kessler, *The Falashas: The Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia* (NY: Holmes and Meier Publishers, 1982), p 74.
3. Ibn Ezra commentary on Torah to Ex. 2:22. See responsa of the Maharam no. 93.
4. Kessler, p 75.
5. Kessler, p 75.
6. Kessler, p 75.
7. Bleich, p 240.
8. Kessler, p 78.
9. Kessler, p 18.
10. RADBAZ, responsa sec. VII, no. 5.

11. RADBAZ, responsa sec. IV, no. 1290.
12. Kessler, pp 18, 42, 48.
13. A. Z. Eshkoli, "Law and Custom Amongst the Jews of Ethiopia in the Light of Rabbinic and Karaite Law," *Tarbiz* 7, 56116, pp 31-56; 121-134.
14. Eshkoli, p 134.
15. M. Wurmbrand, "The Laws of Shabbat Amongst the Jews of Ethiopia," *Sefer Urbach, HaHevrah L' Heker HaMikra*, 5715, vol. 1, pp 236-243.
16. Bleich, pp 246-7.
17. Kessler, p 4.
18. Kessler, p 19.
19. Kessler, p 12.
20. Kessler, p 13.