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# The Saga of Ethiopian Jewry

The errors made in absorbing previous waves of *aliyah* were repeated when the Ethiopians arrived, with disastrous results. It is not too late to correct them, says a famous educator, internationally known for creating unique and successful educational programs.

• By **Dr. Chaim Peri** | Photos: Flash90

A recent spate of violence and aggression by youngsters of Ethiopian descent has shaken the streets of Tel Aviv. A believer in Israel's destiny cannot help but wonder: haven't the 2000 years of Jewish exile erased from our DNA the drive for self-destruction?

In the face of some analyses by the media in which the Israeli government is blamed for the youngsters' discontent, public figures and academia, educators and decision makers must remain practical and keep their feet on the ground. Learning from the mistakes of the past, they must focus on immediate *tikkun*.

First and foremost, the *tikkun* has to do with empowering the older generation. It is now widely accepted that a repeated error in the Jewish State's absorption of its various waves of immigration was its assuming responsibility for the education of the young, while overriding and ignoring the sentiments of the parents. The parent generation's move to a new country was expected to be experienced as a spiritual elevation, a fulfillment of the dreams and prayers of generations.

That it was, but in reality, the new immigrant parents soon found themselves confronted by culture shock and a shattering loss of authority over their offspring.

This proved to be especially destructive regarding the Jewish-Ethiopian community, where reverence for the older generations has always played a crucial role. These parents had been raising their children for generations upon generations with dignity, a sense of Jewish continuity, and a yearning to return to Jerusalem. Now, they found themselves torn between their adherence to the traditions of their forefathers - so fiercely protected in Ethiopia - and their wish to become part of modern Israel.

To make matters worse, not only was the inner fabric of the Jewish-Ethiopian community tremendously weakened, society at large never really had the opportunity to acquire an understanding of who these strange and different looking newcomers are. At first, their dramatic arrival was accompanied by headlines and a rush of national pride - yet these quickly gave way to disappointment and

indifference once the immigrants settled down and the challenges were revealed.

Not only that, public adoration was completely reserved for the ingenuity of those Israelis who acted as their "saviors", ignoring the unbelievable perseverance, rooted in profound spirituality, of this unique Jewish community. Here, among us, unappreciated, were sisters and brothers who had descended from the heights of the Simien Mountains and the wondrous shores of Lake Tana in the Blue Nile, and, hounded by vicious militias, crossed deserts, burying their dead by the thousands - the death toll is estimated at 4000 - on their way to Eretz Israel.

Three decades later, a generation of new parents has emerged in the community. They are a whole echelon of remarkable, learned, proactive individuals, with a record of leadership, be it in the Israel Defense Forces or in civilian life.

This human resource needs to be tapped, in line with the Ethiopian Jewish heritage which puts parental authority first. A national council of Ethiopian Israeli parents with public visibility should manifest itself, spearheading the restoration of parental authority. The voice of such a national council should and could be heard, it could garner public attention, over and above the racket made by the young protesters in the streets. Only then will the dangerous tide that is sweeping through the young generation begin to subside.

Based on decades of learning and interacting with the Beta Israel community, I clearly sense a thirst for such a corrective move. Restoring parental authority and guidance to its original centrality can play a crucial role in restoring the communal sense of wellbeing, by aligning realities with sentiments so deeply ingrained in the collective psyche of the Ethiopian Jewish community.

There is a second, historical *tikkun* which must be introduced, involving the national educational system. I strongly maintain, that had the educational system, from the very onset of the Ethiopian *aliyah*, found the foresight to make the mores of this population into one

of the pillars of value-laden education in Israel, we would now be in a totally different place. Such a strategic move would have provided the native Israeli youngster with an incomparable opportunity to expand the boundaries of his self-perception, discovering an emotional and theoretical connection to an ancient Jewish tribe, its story and heritage. Had we done so, a generation of Israelis, from kindergarten to high-school to academia, would have become part of a corrective process of absorption, in contrast to the educational failures of the previous waves of *aliyah*, which still haunt our society.

One of the advantages of being exposed to the uniqueness and depth of the Jewish-Ethiopian story is that an entire generation could have been better equipped for life in a changing, multi-cultural world. In this regard, the Ethiopian *aliyah* could have been a godsend, not a burden, while at the same time the new arrivals would have had their feelings of self-worth and basic dignity reinforced. When this dignity is lost, life becomes meaningless, and the chaos pouring into the streets is all that remains.

Experience shows that educational programs which unequivocally highlight the genuine significance of Ethiopian Jewish heritage, portraying it as in no way an inferior or deficient representation of Jewish values, have had an important positive influence on the self-perception and identity of the young, with far-reaching therapeutic ramifications. These programs are now being taught in many religious Zionist schools.

The Jewish-Ethiopian saga is one of the most remarkable revelations of Divine Providence, *hashgacha*, in our times. However, the magnitude of the missed opportunity can be as vast as the phenomenon. It is not too late: the time for these two major *tikkuns* is now. Now is also the time to replicate the various successes in *aliyah* absorption that did take place in Israel over the years, this time making sure that no one is left behind.

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