

Rabbis' Perspective: COVID-19 & Ethiopian Jews

Jews in Ethiopia are desperate as the world turns its back during their darkest hour.

As Orthodox rabbis in the greater NYC metropolitan area we have seen our congregants endure tremendous suffering as a result of Covid-19. Despite generally having access to clean water, shelter, healthcare and food, the pain and loss has been immeasurable.

All the more so for the 14,000 Beta Israel in Ethiopia. Even prior to the crisis they somehow endured unbearable conditions, living in mud huts with no running water or electricity while awaiting Aliyah for an average of 15 years. Severe chronic malnutrition ravages the children, leaving them with weakened immune systems. Health care is minimal. What will happen to the children and elderly as Covid-19 hits?

While they await Aliyah they daven daily, go to the mikva and keep kosher. More than 70% of the community have first-degree relatives in Israel. Those who are maternally linked to the Jewish people, over 50%, according to Chief Rabbis Ovadia Yosef, Mordechai Eliyahu, and Shlomo Amar, are halachically Jews (in the words of Rav Amar: “*Yehudim gemurim le'lo safek*”).

Leading rabbis of the religious Zionist community in Israel (e.g., Rav Ya'acov Medan - Rosh Yeshiva Har Etzion, Rav Avraham Gisser – Rosh Yeshiva of Hemed & Ofra, Rav David Stav - Rosh Yeshiva of Tzohar, Rav Re'em HaCohen – Rosh Yeshiva Otniel & Yishuv), have implored Israel to speed up the Aliyah and pleaded for emergency assistance.

The Ethiopian government estimates up to 27 million Covid cases with the peak death rate commencing in late June. Ethiopia has an anemic 0.3 hospital beds per thousand people and only 221 ventilators available for 112 million people. ICU beds barely exist.

Basic health precautions are impossible. The Ethiopian Prime Minister said, “Even taking such common-sense precautions as washing hands is often an unaffordable luxury to the half of the population who lack access to clean water.” Poor and marginalized, living up to eight people in a mud hut, the Beta Israel are helpless.

Where is the outraged voice of the Jewish community? How can we let the Beta Israel die needlessly as we stand on the sidelines? Are these Jewish values?

Struggle to Save Ethiopian Jewry (SSEJ) is trying to reduce Covid-19 deaths. It has provided 70 tons of food, 15 tons of soap, clean water and thousands of masks. It also is deploying 35 health care facilitators and hiring doctors. But it’s not enough; with limited resources SSEJ cannot cope with this pandemic alone. The Jewish Agency has provided SSEJ with financial assistance as has NACOEJ. These contributions, though vital, are not enough.

Ultimately Israel needs to take the remaining Jews in but meanwhile, they must survive. *Lo ta’amod al dam re’echah*. Get involved and give generously (www.ssej.org). Don’t let Jewish children die needlessly.

Rabbi Yoseph Adler	Rinat Yisroel
Rabbi Hershel Billet	Young Israel of Woodmere
Rabbi Kenneth Hain	Beth Shalom
Rabbi Haskel Lookstein	Kehilath Jeshurun
Rabbi Adam Mintz	Kehilat Rayim Ahuvim
Rabbi Jonathan Morgenstern	Young Israel of Scarsdale
Rabbi Allen Schwartz	Ohev Zedek
Rabbi Daniel Sherman	West Side Institutional Synagogue
Rabbi Chaim Steinmetz	Kehilath Jeshurun
Rabbi Ellie Weinstock	Kehilath Jeshurun