

Report of the Rabbinic Mission to Ethiopia

Executive Summary

In March 2025, a delegation of seven Orthodox rabbis, invited by the Struggle to Save Ethiopian Jewry (SSEJ), conducted a fact-finding and humanitarian mission to assess the conditions of the Jewish community in Ethiopia and provide religious and moral support. The rabbis encountered a community with a strong Jewish identity, committed to prayer, Torah study, and the aspiration for Aliyah, despite facing extreme poverty, hunger, illness, and family separation. Many have relatives in Israel, including those serving in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). The delegation concluded that the situation constitutes a humanitarian and halakhic emergency, requiring urgent action from Israel and global Jewry to address immediate needs and facilitate Aliyah.

Introduction

A group of seven rabbis from prominent Orthodox institutions traveled to Ethiopia under SSEJ's auspices to witness the community's challenges, offer support, and advocate for completing the Aliyah process. The delegation comprised:

- Rabbi Mark Dratch, Former Executive Vice President, Rabbinical Council of America
- Rabbi Richard Hidary, Rabbi, Sephardic Synagogue, Brooklyn, NY; Professor, Yeshiva University, NYC
- Rabbi Jonathan Kroll, Principal, SAR High School, Riverdale, NY
- Rabbi Leonard Matanky, Congregation K.I.N.S., Chicago, IL; Dean, Ida Crown Jewish Academy; Former President, RCA; Former Co-President, RZA
- Rabbi Chaim Steinmetz, Senior Rabbi, Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun, New York
- Rabbi Reuven Tradburks, Director of Israel Programs, Rabbinical Council of America
- Rabbi Elie Weinstock, JCAB, Atlantic Beach, NY

(Affiliations listed for identification purposes only)

Historical and Halakhic Context

The Beta Israel, or Ethiopian Jewry, has maintained their Jewish identity for centuries despite isolation. In the 16th century, Rabbi David ben Zimra (Radbaz) affirmed their Jewish lineage. Modern halakhic consensus, solidified by Rav Ovadia Yosef's 1973 ruling, recognized Beta Israel as fully Jewish, leading to Operations Moses (1984) and Solomon (1991). The remaining Falash Mura, descendants of Jews coerced into conversion but who returned to Jewish practice, have been affirmed as Jewish by Rav Ovadia Yosef, Rav Shlomo Amar, and Rav Mordechai Eliyahu, supporting their right to Aliyah. The Rabbinical Council of America, in two resolutions, has also emphasized the urgency of completing this mission.

Observations in Ethiopia

In Gondar (approximately 12,000 Jews) and Addis Ababa (approximately 2,500 Jews), the community lives in extreme poverty, with families in single-room homes that are built primarily from mud and straw and have no indoor plumbing or electricity, and annual incomes averaging \$600. Despite these hardships, their faith remains vibrant: thousands attend daily prayers, children study Torah and sing Hatikvah, and Jewish infrastructure includes schools, camps, a matzah bakery, a cemetery, and Hebrew and Torah education programs. Humanitarian efforts provide food and medical care. The rabbis met families separated from relatives in Israel, many of whom serve in the IDF. They were inspired by the community's resilience, dignity, and deep connection to Jewish life and Israel.

Moral and Communal Imperatives

The delegation identified the following urgent priorities:

1. **Family Reunification:** Immediate action to end bureaucratic delays separating families and to facilitate Aliyah.
2. **Jewish Unity:** Upholding the principle of Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh (all Jews are responsible for one another).
3. **Human Potential:** Ethiopian Jews in Israel have shown remarkable contributions; those remaining deserve equal opportunities.
4. **Halakhic Duty:** Rabbinic consensus affirms their Jewish identity, making delays a violation of moral and halakhic obligations.
5. **Moral Witness:** The Jewish people's integrity hinges on supporting the vulnerable.
6. **Avoid Harmful Rhetoric:** Statements dismissing the issue as endless are unacceptable while Jews suffer.
7. **Responsible Leadership:** Prompt verification of Jewish credentials is critical to enable aid and Aliyah.
8. **Diaspora Responsibility:** If Israel delays Aliyah, Diaspora Jews must provide robust support, guided by Lo ta'amod al dam rei'echah (Do not stand idly by your neighbor's blood).

Call to Action

The delegation urges:

1. **The State of Israel:** Expedite family reunification and Aliyah processing.
2. **Global Jewish Communities:** Renew advocacy with the vigor of the Soviet Jewry movement.
3. **Philanthropic Partners:** Support SSEJ's humanitarian programs for food, medicine, and education.
4. **Synagogues and Schools:** Educate and act until the mission is complete.
5. **The rabbis commit to advocating in their communities, emphasizing that ignorance of Ethiopian Jewry's plight is inexcusable.**

Toward Redemption

The delegation witnessed profound suffering alongside remarkable sanctity. Ethiopian Jews maintain their faith in the Torah, prayer, and hope for a return to Israel despite adversity, reflecting the resilience of Jewish history. Their story echoes Jewish redemption efforts from Babylon to Yemen. A Gondar community leader's

plea: "Tell them our hearts are already in Jerusalem"—underscored the urgency of action. This is not only a humanitarian crisis but a spiritual imperative for Jewish unity.

Share This Report

We urge our colleagues to share this report with rabbis, educators, communal leaders, and advocates via email, synagogue bulletins, social media, and Shabbat discussions. Each action—every email, conversation, or advocacy effort—brings Ethiopian Jewry closer to home.