

The untold story of Beta Israel's heroism

• By PEGGY CIDOR

Ethiopian-born Shmuel Yilma, who immigrated to Israel when he was six years old after a harrowing journey, believes that he has the solution for changing the attitude of Israelis toward Ethiopians. Yilma wants to acquaint Israeli society with the facts, which he says will end the discrimination and racism that the Beta Israel community faces.

Beta Israel is the official name of the Jewish community of Ethiopia. According to tradition, Beta Israel ("house of Israel" in Ge'ez) had its origins in the 4th century CE, when it is claimed that the community refused to convert to Christianity.

"Israelis tend to see us, the immigrants from Ethiopia, as a backward group of lost people who need assistance in every field. There are those who even see us as just unfortunate and persecuted people who have nothing to do with the ethos of Zionism. I want to change that. I want them to recognize our heroes, the heroes of our Zionism," Yilma says.

A social entrepreneur and educator, Yilma founded the Yerusaleim Forum, which reveals the lesser-known story to the greater Israeli public, of the community's devotion to Zionism and willingness to sacrifice and take risks to achieve that goal.

"It's time we are recognized not as a tribe of poor people that the state had to rescue but proud Zionists who were ready for any sacrifice in order to immigrate to Israel."

Yilma undertook this formidable task several years ago, and he is beginning to tear the ignorance and indifference of the public in Israel to his community's Zionist story.

For most Israelis, Ethiopian Jews are considered an ethnic group whose main characteristic is being an unhappy, weakened, almost lost tribe that was saved from extinction only by the initiative and mobilization of strong and powerful Israelis.

There have been many expressions of empathy – along with shameful manifestations of racism. The image of the community is that of a people who preserve ancient customs and need a lot of support from the state's welfare institutions, and who face difficulties getting out of poverty and backwardness, and have a marginal position in Israeli society.

The outburst of anger by the community's youth a decade ago only added to the negative image, and teenagers and young adults, including officers in the IDF, are still exposed to suspicion and awkward questioning by police officers.

Among the Beta Israel community, there is a great deal of frustration, mixed in recent years with great anger over a feeling of exclusion and discrimination, especially among the younger generation who were born in Israel and feel that they are not yet "Israeli" enough in society's eyes.

The integration programs, promotion and many attempts to improve the situation may have succeeded somewhat. But according to Yilma, for the majority of Israelis – both veterans and newcomers – those who



SHMUEL YILMA (third from left) celebrates the Sigd in New York. (Shmuel Yilma)

emigrated from Ethiopia due to the difficult and dangerous situation there, as well as those born in Israel, are seen as dependent and incapable of caring for themselves.

"The Zionist ethos that characterizes most of the immigrants for some reason is not mentioned in regard to Ethiopian immigrants," Yilma says with sadness.

The fifth conference of the Yerusaleim Forum, to be held on November 30, will be dedicated to those heroes: Israeli and American activists, Ethiopians, and members of the entire Jewish people who forever changed the fate of Ethiopian Jewry and the character of Israel. The conference will highlight the inspiring stories of 20 activists from Ethiopia and North America. It is being held with the blessing of President Isaac Herzog, former senator Rudy Boschwitz, and Chief Kess Berko Tegegne.

Yilma says that the forum's main goal is to change the narrative. "We are moved by the Israeli government's determination to rescue every Jew from danger, no matter where they are, yet we have heard nothing of those determined activists – Israelis of Ethiopian descent and American Jews – who dedicated and risked their lives to make the dream of aliyah a reality."

The Beta Israel communities, spread in different locations across Ethiopia, expected to be welcomed with open arms by their fellow Jews. Disappointingly, aliyah was denied to them, as their Jewishness was questioned. This changed in 1974 with the halachic decree by Ovadia Yosef who, as Israel's chief rabbi, recognized them as Jews, in defiance of all other rabbinical institutions.

STARTING IN the 1950s, a few Ethiopian Jews managed to reach Israel. An effort to bring them to Israel

began among Jews who remained in Ethiopia, veteran Israelis, and Jews from North America. A worldwide struggle was conducted, involving American Jews who did not hesitate to gain the support of even then-president George H.W. Bush.

The Yerusaleim Forum is a coalition of social organizations that works to integrate the heritage of Ethiopian Jewry into the Israeli story. The purpose of the forum is to educate the public about Beta Israel's unique culture and history, change the image of the community, promote equal opportunities, and fight discrimination and racism.

Yilma wants to add a layer to the story of Ethiopians that has yet to be told. Not only did the community have a religious longing for Zion that lasted for centuries, but it also took steps to achieve the goal, with Zionist activities that characterized other communities of the Zionist movement. No less important, Yilma says, is to highlight to Israelis the vigorous activity of Zionist leaders and activists in North America who did not hesitate to reach out to anyone who could influence and help.

Susan Pollack, who worked in Ethiopia for the American Association for Ethiopian Jews and is currently president of the Friends of Ethiopian Jews, will speak at the conference about the years of struggle, risk and heroism leading up to the airlifts to Israel. She says that the Ethiopian Jews, the Beta Israel, were not idly sitting and waiting to be "rescued."

"They were brilliant and strategic warriors who survived, fought for their rightful recognition, sought allies, and got to Israel," Yilma explains. Pollack will introduce a panel of Ethiopian and North American activists and heroes who will tell the untold story of what transpired before the airlift operations.



YILMA WITH a holy book on the Sigd. (Shmuel Yilma)



YILMA SPEAKS at the Yerusaleim Forum. (Yael Lavi)

Ethiopian Jews didn't fear the consequences and dared to knock on every door to save those still in Ethiopia and in the transit camps in Sudan from an uncertain fate. It's an untold story, Yilma says, exemplified in a passage from Rahamim Eleazar's testimony.

Eleazar, who will be at the conference and tell this story, is a journalist and radio personality. He not only reported on the fateful events that impacted the future of Ethiopian Jews but was one of the leaders of the struggle for their aliyah.

"From a small village in Ethiopia, he made it all the way to the White House to fulfill his mission," Yilma notes.

As Eleazar relates: "I knew I had to do this for the sake of my family and my community. The highlight of my

activity for aliyah for Ethiopian Jews was the meeting with president George H. W. Bush in the Oval Office.

"I addressed him with these words: 'Mr. President, allow me to express my profound gratitude on behalf of my community for what you have done during Operation Moses; yet these days, too many families remain divided, and the work is not completed yet.'

"I know that in few weeks you are due to meet Russian president Michael Gorbachev in Iceland. Please raise our issues, since we know he is a good friend of Ethiopian president Mengistu Haile Mariam. Please ask him to convince Mengistu to let our family go to Israel and reunify with their family members.' President Bush's answer was: 'I will do my best.' And ultimately, he indeed did his best."



YILMA ON a visit to his birthplace in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. (Shmuel Yilma)

Ten Ethiopian aliyah activists – Eleazar, Avraham Yerdai, Addisu Masala, Admas Chakole, Bellaynesh Ayesh, Berharu Yerdai, Zimra Berhani, Moshe Babu Ya'akov, Feseha Meirat, Thahaye Elias, as well as 10 American Jews – Susan Pollack, Will Recant, Graesum Berger, Henry Rosenberg, Nate Shapiro, Howard Lenhoff, Edith Eveswett, Simcha Jacobovici, Barbara Ribakove Gordon and Boschwitz – will be honored at the conference. These 20 activists will be officially declared "Heroes of the Zionist movement of the Beta Israel community" at the conference.

As for Yilma, his next dream is to see these stories told again and again among Israelis and, most importantly, added to the official curriculum of the country's education curriculum. ♦