



The Truth About Israel:

Israel Airlifts Thousands of Poverty-Stricken Ethiopians in Rescue Operation

Modern Ethiopia, in Eastern Africa, is the oldest independent country in Africa and its history as a nation extends back over two thousand years. While the ancient Greek poet Homer considered Ethiopia to be blessed by the gods, in the past few decades, it has known political and natural disasters of tragic proportions.

Ethiopian Jewish history is also thousands of years old. In spite of their centuries-long isolation from mainstream Judaism, the black-skinned Jews of Ethiopia continued to identify themselves as *Beta Israel* (House of Israel). Yearning to return to Jerusalem and their ancient homeland remained central to their faith and an age-old dream.

In 1974, the emperor of Ethiopia was overthrown by a military coup. For the next several years, under military rule, the country and its people were subject to regional wars, terrible droughts and devastating famines. By 1985, without a rainfall for three years, the famine was most severe. The poverty-stricken economy was mostly dependent on agriculture, and between the war-damaged infrastructure and the drought, Ethiopia was one of the poorest countries in the world. Over

one million people died. By 1990, much of the food aid that was intended for the needy was intercepted by both the government and rebel forces.

By 1976, approximately 250 Ethiopian Jews were living in Israel. Meanwhile, thousand of men,

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women and children began a risky journey from their villages in Northern Ethiopia to Sudan, sustained by their hope and determination to get to Israel. Once they reached the refugee camps in Sudan, representatives of the Jewish Agency of Israel offered assistance, money and medical care. By the 1980s, through a series of covert actions, several thousand more Ethiopian Jews were brought to Israel. However, once these efforts were publicized, they ended abruptly and the borders were closed. By this time, there were about 15,000 Ethiopian immigrants in Israel, with more than 15,000 still stranded in Ethiopia.

In 1989, the governments of Israel and Ethiopia resumed diplomatic relations, creating new possibilities. In the spring of 1991, with rebel forces advancing on the capital, Colonel Mengistu fled the country. In consultation with Israeli officials, the

United States government urged the rebels to permit a rescue operation for Ethiopian Jews. In just over thirty-six hours, spanning the 24th and 25th of May, 1991, 14,324 Ethiopians were airlifted aboard thirty-four El-Al jets in a memorable and dramatic exodus of biblical proportions, known as Operation Solomon. Eight babies were born on board.

The Israeli government continues to advocate, both publicly and privately, for the reunification of remaining Ethiopians with their relatives in Israel.

The vast differences in culture and habits between the isolated, agrarian, Amharic-speaking Ethiopians and the Westernized Israelis presented many unique and ongoing challenges to both the new immigrants and the Israeli society wishing to absorb them.

Nevertheless, there are many welcome signs of adaptation, progress and success. By 1996, the Ethiopian community in Israel won representation in the Israeli parliament, the Knesset.