For Our Soul

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For Our Soul: Ethiopian Jews in Israel.

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Both the immigrants and the Israeli society consider education the single most important enterprise in the absorption process. In its variety of forms and organization, education is also the single most important enterprise nearly all Beta Israel are participating in. From the youngest child in the nursery school to the oldest person (as old as eighty-five), men and women, regardless of previous experiences or conditions, all are engaged in learning languages, participating in organized cultural and socialization activities, learning skills of various kinds, and in general preparing themselves to meet the tremendous challenges confronting them in their new environment. We cannot document all the varieties of educational and training activities engaged in by the olim, but this and the next two chapters present analyses of some of their major aspects. Learning, by its very nature, is a problem-solving activity. But it also generates frustrations, anxieties, and frictions among and between providers and receivers. The normal challenges to learning are compounded many times over by the many differences between the language, culture, and broad social and psychological makeups of the Beta Israel and the service providers.
To get some perspective on the structure and philosophy underlying the system of primary education in Israel, I interviewed several high-ranking officials as well as school inspectors and field representatives. The first was David Pur, head of the secular education division of the Pedagogical Service of the Ministry of Education and Culture. Of Polish descent, Pur was born and raised in Israel. We met in his very modest office on King David Street in Jerusalem.

With respect to the structure of primary education, Pur explained that there are three distinct systems (branches) operating under the general direction of the Ministry of Education and Culture: the state secular, the state religious, and the independent. About 75 percent of all primary-school-aged children are enrolled in state secular schools, 20 percent in state religious schools, and 5 percent in independent schools (4.6 percent are controlled by the Hasidim; the remaining 0.4 percent are controlled by the Orthodox wing).

The two state-sponsored systems receive most of their support from the central treasury. The independent system has unusual features. Although it is administered by the ultra-Orthodox (Agudat Israel), which does not recognize either the efficacy of Zionism or the State of Israel itself, it receives some government subvention. But the Ministry of Education and Culture has very little or no regulatory powers vis-à-vis this system. It has its own unique conceptions, approaches, and methods of teaching and enjoys the power to accept or reject students based on its own criteria. The three systems certify their teachers through the Ministry of Education and Culture, though each has its own teacher-training institutions. At the secondary level, the training and certification responsibilities fall upon the several universities.¹

The state secular and state religious systems of curricula and matriculation examinations are quite similar. Their differences lie in the biblical, historical, and Talmudic studies, where they differ in inclusion, emphasis and method. For instance, the state secular schools present biblical studies and literature humanistically and in historical context, whereas the religious wing presents them from the perspectives of revelation or divine guidance. In addition, the religious
schools include instruction in religious customs and rituals such as meal preparation, holy day observations, and so on. Moreover, students participate in daily worship and other religious activities and are expected to wear appropriate attire (no jeans or short skirts for girls; boys must wear the yarmulke). One will generally find more girls than boys in the religious schools. However, in the yeshivot, or elite religious academies, males predominate because, according to tradition, religious vocation is restricted to men.

Among Israeli Jews, more than 70 percent are secular. The pioneer Zionists, Pur explained, were products of the Enlightenment of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. They were either atheists or otherwise nonbelievers in religion. This process of secularization which affected Europeans was wholly absent from the experiences of the Orientals, and this difference in historical experience is manifestly reflected in present-day Israeli society. The 30 percent religious minority draws a significant number of its members from the Oriental population (of Third World background). The majority of students enrolled in the religious schools are from religious homes and are from the Sephardi and mixed sectors of society. Females are also highly represented in religious schools. This group is generally disadvantaged in income, employment, and educational achievement.

In recent years, there has been an observable shift even among the Ashkenazim toward religion and conservative political outlook. However, as far as the schools are concerned, the trend is in the opposite direction. Enrollments in religious schools are declining as more and more parents send their children to state secular schools. The competition these days is not so much between the secular and religious schools as it is between the Zionist and the anti-Zionist religious schools. Both would like to see religious education become the center of educational activity, but they disagree profoundly when it comes to their attitude toward the state. A trend toward theocracy is apparent among the people from northern Africa and the Middle East. These olim are susceptible to religious dogmas and charismatic personality cults. Israel is an island of democracy (within the Green Line or pre-1967 borders and for the Jewish population). But, Pur added, the danger for Israel does not arise from the mentality of the Jewish people (Orientals) but from where people live and the period of time people are living in. The secular schools are striving to teach students the efficacy of democratic values, but in the religious schools it is something else, by which Pur meant that the religious branch conducts classes on the bases of divine revelation and guidance, with little if any account given for the human, political dimensions.
We talked about the differences in national and world views among graduates of the various educational systems. Pur admitted that there are differences similar to those found among the general population. Israeli society is pluralistic. Even within the religious wing there are extremes—extreme nationalists and extreme leftists. Research has demonstrated that those who graduate from the religious schools tend to be conservative. I asked whether such divisions worry him. Pur simply responded, “It is a fact of life.” On the other hand, he pointed out the important unifying role played by Jewish tradition, the Hebrew language, holy days, and celebrations. These reflect shared values and encourage some common perspectives which may help bind Israelis together as a national community, he said. He illustrated his point with the example of his membership in a particular kibbutz. Although the kibbutz is nonreligious, its members do celebrate Passover and other holy days. In addition to these traditions, he said, all share a common destiny.

More than 90 percent of Ethiopian children and youth attend religious schools. To get an understanding of the structure and goals of the state religious administration, I interviewed Ben Yashar, assistant to the head of the state religious education system. Yashar is also in charge of field supervision of the Ethiopian children in state religious schools. He reiterated that the concepts of immigration as understood in the United States and in Israel are entirely different things. In Israel, the concept is better represented by the term aliyah, which in Hebrew means “ascent,” a return to one’s home to reunite with a family. The term immigration, on the other hand, connotes economic, political, or other instrumental motives. In other words, he said, in the United States immigrants are looked upon as a burden to be borne; in Israel, the immigration process is a reunion and an opportunity for both the immigrants, and the receiving society. These differences, he said, are very significant, and the education programs that have been forged for the Ethiopian immigrants are grounded in a set of beliefs and assumptions about their homecoming and shared benefits.

In Israel’s history of waves of aliyah, no group has ever been the target of so much special concern as the Beta Israel. Recognizing the special nature of the Ethiopian olim, the field unit Yashar supervises came into being specifically to address their needs. For the first time, he said, they formulated special curricula and trained teachers for special tasks. In the course of preparations, they consulted the kes-soch. They also took into account the knowledge left by Emmanuel
Tamrat, Halevy, Faitlovitch, and others (the list included people who wrote about the religious aspects of the Beta Israel but not historians, anthropologists, and linguists who have written voluminously about Ethiopia and the Jews). Yashar reiterated that 90 percent of Beta Israel education is in the hands of the religious wing, of the Ministry of Education and Culture (including the Youth Aliyah, which is specially coordinated with the Youth Department of the Jewish Agency). The decision to incorporate them initially into the state religious system was made by the Knesset after consultation with Beta Israel leadership. The rationale was to mitigate or lessen the cultural and religious shocks and facilitate their smooth adjustment on the one hand and, on the other, to give the olim as much knowledge of the Hebrew language and modern Judaism as quickly as they could absorb it. The special arrangement was to last for a period of one year (until January 1986). Yashar explained that the law stipulates that parents should be given information about the different types of schools so that they can decide where they would like to enroll their children after the first year. To date, most Beta Israel children continue to participate in the religious system.

Reports Yashar had received thus far from teachers, administrators, and others who knew the children were very encouraging. The children were very highly motivated to learn. They often asked teachers for more homework and even remained after school to do additional work. They worked hard. They performed well in basic arithmetic. The problem areas for them were language, literature, reading comprehension, and abstract thinking. Yashar was fairly optimistic that if financial subvention for special tutorials continued, the schools would be able to accelerate their progress. Each child in the primary schools was entitled to 1.8 hours of extra tutorial help per week. At the secondary level, it is 2.2 hours per week. The special tutorials took place outside regular classroom hours. The tutors were either the regular classroom teachers, teachers brought from other schools, or adult volunteers drawn from the community. The school principal had some leeway to make arrangements.

When I asked for Yashar's impressions of Beta Israel response to religious teachings, he said that most insisted on maintaining their own traditions. "We can't do much to force them to go contrary to their wishes," he said. Talmudic and other mainstream Judaic learning were coming very slowly. The young people who lived in the religious dormitories were doing better because they were surrounded by religious precepts and rituals. Those in the grade schools were not pro-
gressing as much. The reconversion controversies did not affect the teaching-learning efforts (as far as Yashar’s office was concerned). “In our guidance to all our teachers and administrators,” he said, “we stress that as far as we are concerned, all Jews are equal.” Regarding the goal of full integration of the Beta Israel children, Yashar said that the inhibiting factors were housing and employment availabilities. Parents settled where there was housing and jobs. As a result, the Beta Israel were concentrated in certain communities and absent in others. High apartment vacancies may indicate instability in the community, and so, Yashar said, they had to be very cautious. Within the schools, Yashar observed that there were problems in that some veteran Israeli parents did not want to send their children to study with Beta Israel children. These were usually parents of the lower socio-economic sector of society.

At this juncture, I turned to David Stahl, our interpreter. Stahl, originally from New York, had come to settle in Israel in 1984. I asked him how he thought race relations in Israel compared to those in the United States. He said there was no comparison. In Israel, problems were very mild. In New York, people talked differently—hypocritically—even when their feelings were against you. The people in Israel, especially the sabra, or native-born, may seem hard, rude, and thoughtless on the outside, but inside they were soft and gentle. This included their approach to race relations. Even when they seemed to be talking tough, they did not mean it.

NURSERY AND KINDERGARTEN

Israel has one of the most advanced systems of preschool education in the world. Although attendance is voluntary, nearly all three- and four-year-old children attend some government-sponsored, quasi-governmental, or nongovernmental nursery school. The fees are nominal. Together with their veteran counterparts, the Beta Israel children participate in these programs beginning at an early age. My informants report and my own observations confirm that as far as absorption and socialization processes are concerned, this generation of children will be much better off than the older generations. Other things being equal, one can expect that their early exposure to cognitive and social experiences will enhance
their readiness to participate fully in later training opportunities. This may in turn open up other opportunities for social mobility, the attainment of good jobs, and other measures of status and respect. Whether young Ethiopian children come from an intact home or are orphans, these educational enrichment and socialization programs are likely to prove of significant benefit to them in their development.

PRIMARY LEVEL

At the primary level, attendance is universal and compulsory. Special arrangements have been made for the newcomers. Education during their first year in Israel is provided either at the absorption centers or in special classrooms in nearby institutions. During that year, intense attention is given to Hebrew, personal hygiene and health, and a variety of socialization experiences. Mornings are typically devoted to classroom instruction. Under the supervision of adult volunteers, the children spend their afternoons engaged in games, study, or tutorials.

During the second year, pupils attend community schools with other Israeli children. Within these schools, however, the vast majority remain segregated as a group. All Ethiopians are assigned to the same class. They still need intensive support and tutoring in all aspects of the curricula. They also need plenty of exposure to the culture of the school environment—rules and regulations—how to relate to children of different backgrounds, how to play following game rules, and so on. These experiences prepare them to cope better when the time arrives for integrated learning.

SIZE AND DISTRIBUTION OF THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL POPULATION

Table 2 shows the number of Ethiopian students enrolled in kindergarten and primary classes in Israel's six district as of 1987.

In addition, there were approximately twenty-five hundred high-school-aged students who resided in forty-four Youth Aliyah villages
Primary Education

TABLE 2

Number of Beta Israel enrolled in primary schools by district, 1987

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Kindergarten</th>
<th>Grades 1–8</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jerusalem</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tel Aviv</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>509</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haifa</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>577</td>
<td>777</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>1,229</td>
<td>1,779</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>1,030</td>
<td>1,432</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,248</strong></td>
<td><strong>3,614</strong></td>
<td><strong>4,862</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


and another sixty who attended state-sponsored secondary schools outside the Youth Aliyah system. Another eight hundred students whose ages ranged from eighteen to twenty-eight participated in the Youth Administration Project. Preuniversity programs included 169 Beta Israel, and approximately one hundred fifty attended universities. All told, about eighty-five hundred Beta Israel or 53 percent of the entire Beta Israel population, were attending school on a full-time basis. Kindergarten through grade eight accounted for 57 percent of the total enrollment. Of the approximately sixteen thousand Ethiopian Jews in Israel in 1987, 30 percent attended primary school.

With this background on the structure and philosophies of the state secular and state religious systems of education and the size and distribution of enrollments, let us now proceed to the field to examine the operation of the schools and the performance of the Beta Israel children. While the cases presented were not randomly selected, they are representative examples of the state-sponsored schools observed.

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SINAI SCHOOL

Before my first visit to Sinai School, a state religious school in Ashkelon, I interviewed Eli Dayan, the mayor of that town. He is a young politician of Moroccan origin. He wears a kippa and is considered a rising star in the Labor Party. Although he spoke good English, his assistant, Ruth Greenman, a woman of South African background, sat nearby to assist. Rami Davidi, also of Moroccan background, the city’s coordinator of immigrants, was also present. According to the mayor, the majority of Ashkelon’s sixty thousand residents were of northern African origin—primarily from Morocco, though other groups are also represented. There were approximately one thousand Beta Israel. Ashkelon was one of the few municipalities with budgetary provisions for ethnic and cultural activities. Efforts also had been made to follow a housing policy that would fuse or integrate the diverse communities. But housing shortages made this difficult. Availability was a stronger determining factor than the need to locate people in certain buildings or neighborhoods to achieve the goal of integration. In spite of policy declaration and political and ideological beliefs in the desirability and efficacy of an integrated community, the economic realities of the country continued to favor the “ghettoization” of the immigrants. Efforts to achieve integration also were frustrated by the fact that most Beta Israel wanted to live as close as they can to their relatives and were therefore unwilling to accept the city’s assignments, which were based on quite different criteria. The patterns of enrollment in the schools reflected these realities.

Sinai School was thirty years old. The school principal, Shlomo Kabesa, had served as principal for thirteen years. Like most of the teachers and counselors, he was originally from northern Africa. Since it was one of the first schools to take Beta Israel children in 1980, Sinai School was relatively experienced in working with Ethiopian children and their families. Some of the students had attended for six years. Eighty of the three hundred students attending Sinai were Beta Israel. As was the case with most other schools in this region, the majority of students were Sephardi, primarily of northern African background. With the exception of one class of students who arrived during Operation Moses, the majority of Beta Israel children
attended classes with their veteran peers. In each class, 25 to 30 percent of the students were Beta Israel. To supplement classroom instruction, the Beta Israel children received approximately one hundred fifty special tutorials per year to help them catch up with their veteran classmates. Materially, the school was very poor. There were chalkboards, the classroom walls were adorned with posters and portraits of current political leaders (President Herzog and Prime Minister Shamir), chief rabbis, the flag of Israel, and some historical Jewish figures. The library, which served also as a study center, was very modest. "We depend on donations and gifts [for the library]," said Sara who had a master's degree in ethnic relations and filled in as part-time school counselor and librarian. The qualifications of the teachers appeared not to be high. Almost all the teachers were Sephardi women. Both administrators (the principal and assistant principal) were men.

Either together with the regional supervisor (of Ethiopian origin) or by myself, I had many occasions to observe the students inside and outside their classrooms. Those Beta Israel children who arrived in the early 1980s related well to their predominantly Sephardi peers. The teachers reported that at first they were quiet, gentle, and soft-spoken; but now they were as boisterous, rowdy, and carefree as their veteran classmates. They mixed with the other students and joined in the pushing, shoving, and hollering unselfconsciously. In the classrooms, the seating arrangements were random and mixed, perhaps without deliberate effort on the part of the classroom teacher.

Before the first group of Beta Israel arrived in the 1980s, the teachers and counselors were oriented to the task by psychologists and anthropologists. According to the principal, Sinai School, by virtue of its long experience in working with Beta Israel children, prepared handbooks covering such topics as the games Beta Israel children prefer and holiday observations for distribution to other schools. The school personnel also used the children as interpreters to communicate with the parents. Although such experience may boost the morale of the children, it may humble the parents.

Although boys and girls did not share the same benches, the ambience in the classroom was generally quite casual. In the higher grades, children moved freely in and out of the classrooms without asking permission. At all grade levels, students and teachers addressed one another using first names. This latter aspect of informality is certainly alien to Ethiopian upbringing and may be the reason why one hears young people using the Amharic informal or familiar appellation of anta or anchì when addressing their male and female elders, respectively, rather than the expected polite form of irsewa.
When the school personnel assessed the progress of the Ethiopian students and the advantages their school offered, they tended to stress the social outcomes. The consensus among the teachers and other school personnel was that the Beta Israel children were better off learning with Sephardi children. The Sephardi environment, they said, was especially supportive of the newcomers. As they saw it, the Ethiopians shared more similar cultural values and norms with the Sephardi population than with the Ashkenazim. They did not raise the question of cognitive stimulation that may come from more academically challenging peers who are usually from higher and middle socioeconomic backgrounds, which often translates to mean of Ashkenazi background. But on the whole it is true that classrooms in the southern region, where this school was located, are much more integrated than in any other region, even after the time of arrival from Africa is taken into consideration. Also, the Beta Israel children seemed to be relatively at ease in their relations to classmates. If integration also means progress in learning, this is indeed a big achievement. But there is more to learning than that.

Considerable progress had been made in achieving the objectives of socialization and integration. Most of the Beta Israel children who arrived before Operation Moses were relatively at ease with themselves, with their veteran classmates, and with the school environment. Those who arrived later were not yet attending classes with non-Beta Israel students. Their social adjustment may reflect that they had been there for some three years, that their teachers and veteran classmates were of similar backgrounds, and that there was some proximity in culture and color of skin. Even so, this kind of mixing is very unusual in the annals of Ethiopian Jews in Israel.

The concern was whether these children were placed in classrooms or schools that would facilitate their cognitive development as well. The answer is that while the general environment was relatively conducive to social integration, cognitively it was weak. The ways in which classes were organized and taught were not conducive to optimal learning. When observed in the classroom, the children did not seem to be stimulated, and they were not paying attention to the task at hand. The selection of books in the library was meager and the teaching aids were dull.

Perhaps there was a trade-off for every decision. In the southern region of Israel, and in the religious schools in general, the majority of the population were of Third World background. The region and the schools were administered, for the most part, by first-generation
immigrants from northern Africa. This segment of society had been unable to find a place in higher positions by following the regular channels and was now aligning itself with the right-wing religious parties. As one Ashkenazi psychologist from the city of Afula observed, “the religious wing of Israeli society generally breeds narrow concepts and fanatical approaches to life in general and education in particular.” Further, the northern African political-cultural background included a dictatorial form of governance without separation of state and religion. Charismatic personality was more important than competence, power more important than compassion. Individual or group perceptions of God were more important than logic, verified knowledge, or reality. This, then, was the environment in which the Beta Israel children were being nurtured. As Chaim Adler observed, the intellectual climate for the Ethiopians was not conducive to rapid cognitive development. The children of the Beta Israel might have been relatively well-off in their social interactions, but cognitively, and for their long-term interests in Israel, they would benefit from an intellectually more stimulating environment. One may argue that the Beta Israel children only shared what existed and that they were no worse off than their veteran classmates. This is true, except that the others were second-generation children who were by comparison relatively well established and well acculturated. In all likelihood, the Beta Israel children would carry a larger burden than the others because they were first-generation immigrants and they were black.

MOREA SCHOOL

Morea School is a religious, coeducational institution, and as far as the Beta Israel are concerned, supposedly an “integrated” one. It covers kindergarten to sixth or eighth grade. Located on the highest point of the town, the school has a commanding view. The elevation also means colder temperatures during the winter months (my visits were in the months of November, December, and April).

The gymnastic classes as well as the others were integrated, according to the instructor, but he said the Ethiopian children had some specific problems. On my visits, I did not observe much integration.
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Accompanied by Yafa Chase—a female leader of volunteer social workers from Connecticut who speaks some Amharic and Hebrew, very well trusted by the immigrants of the community, and who had been working for a couple of years in that capacity—I visited the kindergarten class and grades two and three. There were about twenty students in the third-grade biology class I observed. As I sat in this class some of the Beta Israel students rushed in with grass all over their heads and clothing. They were returning from gymnastic activity outdoors. Their appearance may have indicated improper grooming habits or lack of personal pride in looking tidy and attractive. I was told that this class was integrated, but there were only five non-Ethiopian students out of twenty-two. The seating pattern in this classroom was interesting; the Beta Israel gravitated to one side of the classroom and sought out one another’s company.

Based on what I had heard earlier about resistance to integration of the Beta Israel in this community, I asked how long the fear that integration would retard the progress of their children would persist among the veteran parents. The teacher answered, “Maybe a couple of years.” She told me of her experience the year before with a group of Beta Israel ages seven to nine. At first, she said, it was hard communicating with them. But they worked hard from eight to twelve every day, and they received additional help from volunteers in the afternoons. That brought them to the level where they could function adequately in Hebrew. “They had motivation; that’s why they succeeded,” she says. This was so despite the fact that they were unable to start school until October on account of the religious strike. She observed that the group of Beta Israel students she taught the year before was more responsible and mature than the one with whom she was presently working.

At the kindergarten level, Beta Israel children would not work without close supervision and encouragement by the teachers. But now they could initiate their own activities. This habit (waiting for adults to give directions) was a carry over from the home, where there was very little a child could do to express himself or herself and where any kind of learning was adult-initiated. The child was accustomed to receiving orders, and, in turn, he or she also learned to give orders to the younger ones. At home, the overriding concern was with the physical security of the child rather than the free expression of self through play or other activities. In the nursery school, on the other hand, safety was provided by the standard regulations governing play equipment and the like; the major concern was to provide an environment that encourages free play of the imagination.
I next visited a kindergarten and a second-grade class. The latter was comprised of students with a wide range of abilities and noticeable differences in their readiness to learn. There were some advanced students who should have been promoted to a higher grade and others who had arrived from Ethiopia only a couple of months earlier and had no grasp of what was going on in the classroom. The newcomers did nothing but clown to amuse themselves and others. This class included students with emotional or learning problems. One child, for reasons unknown, refused to read, write or even open a book. One time he did look over at the book of a seat mate, but the moment the teacher took notice of his action, he withdrew into himself again. Despite the efforts of the classroom teacher, Miriam Avraham, these twenty-two students were not progressing.

The teacher herself was Sephardi. There was another woman assigned to the classroom to assist, but she did not do much during the several visits I made there. After my last observation of this classroom, I felt miserable about the poor quality of the learning environment—the range of problems among the learners, their apparent lack of motivation, and their untidy appearance. Moreover, three of the best Beta Israel students who would benefit from advancement to the next class were being held back for administrative and public relations reasons. The teacher herself felt helpless in the face of the administrative obstacles. The school principal refused to group the children according to their special needs and abilities. When the class was over, I went to meet with the school principal, Avraham Dagan. I was accompanied by Yafa Chase; a few minutes later, the classroom teacher joined us. I briefed the principal on my observations and advanced some recommendations which included the promotion of three Beta Israel students to the next grade and the need to have more teachers in the classroom to attend to the differing needs of these children. The teacher talked to him in Hebrew with much animation. It was not until later that I learned she was agreeing with my assessment of the situation and expressing her dissatisfaction with his inaction or unwillingness to take steps to tackle the problems he himself acknowledged.

The principal concurred with most of our observations and added his own to the list, including the following. Many of the teachers were there because they could not go anywhere else. There were too many Ethiopians in one school—60 percent of the student body were Beta Israel, which hampered integration. The hygiene and personal appearance of the Beta Israel were problems—they arrived at school...
untidy, their clothing and shoes were dirty and torn, and they often arrived wearing sandals in winter. They were smelly, he said; they shaved their heads, and came to school without lunch. They often had runny noses and sometimes came to school when they were sick. They did not bring pencils, pens, pencil sharpeners, or gymnastic attire. The Ministry supplied money for basic textbooks, but the parents were supposed to supply the rest. The students told their teachers that their fathers did not give them money. When the teachers took the matter directly to the parents, they got some results; otherwise, the parents did not volunteer to provide even the most basic things their children needed to do their school work. As an incentive, some teachers told the children that if they brought one notebook, the school would supply another. But, one teacher commented, “the parents don’t care because they don’t know the importance of learning. The parents don’t know what is important and what is not. They go to the stores to buy sweets and fancy stuff, but are not willing to buy notebooks.” The principal planned to talk to the parents on the subject, the teacher added, but the trouble is that “all Ethiopians are like one family. They eat together, decide together, and the like. So I learned that if I can talk to one parent he will tell the others. This means they are ‘group-think.’ Even then the Ethiopian parents respect the teachers more than they respect the administrators at the absorption centers. When I talk to them, I illustrate what I mean by drawing pictures. Everything begins with the home. The place they come from is very primitive. Every day I tell them how important cleanliness is; I tell them about washing, and with the good weather and sunshine it is easy to wash clothes and get them dry. Sometimes they come to school in winter wearing sandals and without appropriate covers while it is raining. In time, change will come; they will be like the other Israeli children.”

Another problem was punctuality. Often children came late to school. The excuses they gave included “Mother wanted me to mind the baby” or “Mother sent me to the store to buy some bread.” Another issue was that the Ethiopian children were shy, timid, withdrawn, suspicious, and violent. Referring to the shyness, the teacher remarked that this behavior was sometimes nice.

The resistance of the veteran community to the integration of Beta Israel with their children in the classrooms was a major dilemma. According to the principal, migrant parents wanted to see their children learning in the same classrooms with others, but the veteran Israeli parents refused. Highly segregated classes were maintained because,
when pushed, the veteran parents withdrew or threatened to withdraw their children from the school. In addition, the school was worried that it would get a reputation for catering primarily to the needs of disadvantaged children. As a result, most Beta Israel children, even those who came earlier, continued to attend segregated classes. When the volunteer social worker pointed out to the principal that some of the Beta Israel needed promotion, he said, “To what?” When told to the next higher class or the fast track made up of children from veteran Israeli families, he replied that he would not do it. The classroom teacher repeated the names of the children who should be promoted, but he still refused to consider the proposal. He maintained that the promotion of even the best Beta Israel students might make the veteran children feel they were being held back, and that would hurt the reputation of the school. In addition, he reasoned, to stimulate higher achievement, the class needed the presence of these students as models. This was, of course, circuitous reasoning. If a few Beta Israel children were doing so well, they should not be held back with the slow learners, nor should they stay to serve as models for the others. The principal either needed to create a special class for these students or promote them to the other classes made up wholly of veteran Israelis. This is a place where the Beta Israel community needs a strong, knowledgeable advocate. At present, there is no such person.

The dynamics of the triangle involving the school, the home, and the children are very complicated. A major assumption underlying the above complaints conveyed by the principal is that the Beta Israel community—the parents as well as the children—are aware of what the school requires, expects, or demands of them. Is this assumption a fair one? I do not think so. It is important to reiterate that the Beta Israel are mostly of rural origin, nonliterate, and conservative. Since coming to Israel, up to this point they have been sheltered from the outside influences of the new world, perhaps too much and for too long, as one government report pointed out. Until the authorities decided quite suddenly to push them out, the Beta Israel had lived in the protective environment of the absorption centers. With little advance notice or preparation, they were expected to establish themselves in apartments, send their children to community schools, anticipate the requirements of the school culture, and provide for the material, social, and psychological needs of their school-going children. Former care providers and counselors who might have assisted them during this transition already had been dismissed by the Jewish Agency.
School administrators and classroom teachers were also not prepared properly for the Beta Israel. Had they been prepared, the problems of transition would have been expected and the behaviors that led to the complaints of school personnel would have been more understandable. But this is not what happened. The school personnel are also victims of ignorance. They know very little about the background of the migrants or the circumstances that led them to their present situation. The principal agencies responsible for their arrival in Israel and involved in their adjustment during the first year should have been actively involved in the selection of schools for the children. Neither the parents nor the schools were knowledgeable about placement. And, for a period of time, these agencies should have provided guidance and kept tabs on student progress or lack thereof. That such preparation and continuity in services were not provided during the transition phase is a tragedy.

The problems of the migrants as pinpointed by school personnel may be divided into two categories: material and cultural. The Beta Israel migrants live on two types of income: pensions from the government of Israel or wages from employment. The pensions are a very important source of income and are generous. But they are inadequate for the many needs of the people. Incomes from employment are also very limited. Most Beta Israel who find work are in menial jobs that pay the lowest wages. They are beginning from nothing to set up their homes, and there are many things they must buy to furnish their apartments. There is usually not enough money to buy items such as washing machines considered necessary especially during the winter season, the type and amount of clothing deemed necessary by the school for the children, and the like. On the cultural side, the migrants or their children cannot be expected to have a full grasp of the numerous and intricate expectations, requirements, or demands of the schools or of the society in general. Most are unfamiliar with the requirements of modern schooling; a few have had some previous experience, but it is in the context of the society they have left behind. At the same time, the school is under pressure to satisfy many conflicting demands. On the one hand, it is to meet the diverse social and educational needs of the migrants without challenging community perceptions that they are compromising the quality of education provided to the veteran children. Meanwhile, they are trying to guard their turf vis-à-vis the state secular educational system, which is ready and willing to accept the challenge of providing education to Beta Israel students. Up to now, they have had limited oppor-
tunity to do. In the absence of mutual knowledge and understanding at the institutional level and without an appropriate central coordinating body capable of providing the requisite guidelines, these competing demands and conflicting expectations inevitably lead to misunderstandings, mistrust, and misgivings as well as the concomitant recriminations and wastes of energy and resources we are witnessing. However, even at the central level, state religious and state secular systems of education do not see eye to eye. Hence, even if it is determined that some children would benefit more from the pedagogical programs provided by the state secular system, it is not easy for school counselors or social workers in the religious system to concur or agree to transfer students. In fact, for political reasons, it may be virtually impossible for them to do so. The few volunteer social workers who worked with the Beta Israel in the absorption centers and who have earned their trust and are still available cannot advise Beta Israel regarding school placement even when they are convinced that they know which would be better for the child. They fear that they would be intimidated by those in the religious school system who may think their interests are under attack.

**RAMOT SCHOOL**

Ramot, a secular school, is near Morea. The school principal, Yacov Azulos, completing his doctoral program at Hebrew University, was a religious person. He was the only religious person in the country to hold such a position in a secular school. It was true that religious teachers do teach in secular schools (although the reverse was seldom true). This prompted Azulos to comment that “we teach more religion in the secular system of education than they teach in the religious one. The second grade received the Torah here the other day.” The religious system is more politics than religion, he said. He is a proponent of secular education. On the whole, he sounded totally different in his sensitivity to the needs of the learners and his openness in talking about the subject from his counterpart in the school several miles away.

With a total of four hundred students at Ramot School, only five were Beta Israel. Azulos would have liked to enroll more Beta Israel students, especially the little ones, in his school, but unless the
parents took the initiative he was unable to do so. Besides, if he took the Beta Israel, the other school would become empty. The determined efforts of some social workers, led by an American volunteer, convinced some parents that their children would be much better off attending the secular school. The Morea personnel were angry when the transfers materialized.

The residents in the vicinity of Ramot School were of high socioeconomic status. Because of the large hospital located nearby, the parents of children who attended the school were doctors and other hospital workers. Thus, the school was considered one of the best in the large town—perhaps even in the country. The interaction of the Beta Israel children with their veteran peers was described as excellent.

The principal thought the questions raised by the Beta Israel parents before they made the decision to enroll their children were thoughtful and intelligent. With the assistance of capable social workers, he hoped more Beta Israel parents would come to visit in the future and inquire about the school. Once enrolled, the Beta Israel students received tutoring from American volunteers over and above the 1.8 hours provided by the government. He said that, as a group, the Beta Israel children had excellent skills in mathematics where there was no language involved. It was in the area of language—Hebrew and English—that the five children experienced the greatest difficulty. However, with the help of volunteers from English-speaking countries, they were making progress.

All five Beta Israel students in this school were girls. I talked to three of them as a group and then individually. One of them, Offir (her Hebrew name), said the school that she and the others attended the year before had not provided enough challenge. "We did not progress very much," she said. "This year we are happy." I asked her what language she used at home. She told me that since their parents did not speak much Hebrew, they used Amharic. But to help their parents learn, they sometimes spoke Hebrew with them. At other times, when the children were together, they spoke Amharic so they would not lose it.

Offir experienced many hardships in the Sudan after she left Ethiopia. She had been in Israel for nearly two years. She was the daughter of one of the most articulate members of the Beta Israel community, who had been a man of high status before he left Ethiopia. Her mother looked much younger than her father; this is probably his second marriage. Offir may have been the only child of her parents or at
least the only one in Israel. She was very close to her parents and very concerned for their well-being. I saw a letter she had written in Hebrew on behalf of her parents to the regional director of housing. The director said the letter was of high quality and very touching. On the whole, she appeared articulate, pleasant, and mature for her age. The director of housing commented that young people like her sustain hope for the future of the Ethiopian Jews in Israel.

ASSESSING THE SOCIOECONOMIC MILIEU OF THE SCHOOLS

The Morea and Ramot schools presented here are located in one of the two towns where there are large concentrations of Beta Israel and people of northern African background—primarily from Morocco. The mayor and most of the top officials are of Moroccan background. In my effort to understand the character and dynamics of this community and how these may affect the schooling of the migrants, I interviewed community leaders, department heads of the municipality, the head of the community activities center, and a psychologist. The following portrayals of the situation are based on these interviews.

One of the complaints of the Morea School staff was the lack of psychologists who could assess the conditions of the student body. Next door in the secular school, there was no such shortage. I invited one of the school psychologists at the secular school to describe the psychological environment of the schools and the community. The psychologist was a woman of Hungarian origin; she spoke fluent English. Since we had met on several other occasions during my previous visits, we felt at ease with each other. The dialogue began in the school and continued in the coffee shop downtown.

She agreed that the paucity of psychologists was a very real problem in the schools, especially in the smaller towns. Problems were compounded in communities where the Beta Israel were concentrated. Most psychologists served several schools. In the school system where she worked there was one school that enrolled Beta Israel students. Although she had occasion to visit two of the classrooms in the religious school, she did so with great reluctance. She said she didn’t want to touch the problems of the Beta Israel students “even if they hung them.” To begin with, she explained, there were no appro-
priate test instruments to evaluate the kinds of problems the Beta Is-
rael presented. Even pencil-and-paper tests that required the child to
draw a figure or some object may not be valid for this population. In
addition, “there are so many problems with this population that it can
drown you. One can devote one’s life and still not solve any prob-
lems.” Another problem confronting the psychologist was that the
ages of the children were generally not known, and it was difficult to
determine social or psychological criteria for assigning students to
appropriate groups. In some respects, the treatment of the Ethiopians
was not exceptional. Numerous other aliyyah had been received nega-
tively. The Romanians, the Hungarians, the Moroccans, the Egyp-
tians, and the Yemenites had all experienced the effects of discrimina-
tion. Although the Russians fared better, the Georgians had some
problems; they did not mix with others.

Another problem, she said, was that the teachers in the religious
schools were inferior. “I do not work with them,” she said. “I would
not come near that. The teachers in the religious schools are Sep-
hardic; their qualifications are lower than those held by teachers in
the secular schools. They are teaching darker and darker generations.
Educational levels get lower and lower with each succeeding genera-
tion and succeeding aliyyah. We are still reaping the fruits of the 1950s
[the coming en masse of the Orientals]. Now the darker people get to
power through the religious institutions. Many of the secular institu-
tions and avenues are closed to them. Therefore, they need to create
and enlarge their power through the religious institutions.” In the ma-
jor cities, the schools were of higher standard, but not in the towns
and settlement centers. Speaking of the language problem for each
succeeding aliyyah, she said, Bialik, the famous Israeli poet, summed it
up well when he said that “Hebrew is the only language taught by
children to their parents.”

HOME AND SCHOOL

Chapter 4 dealt extensively with
the major issues confronting Beta Israel families in their new home.
Some major issues impinged on the efforts of the schools as well. To
begin, it is important to remember that, over the past forty years in
Ethiopia, a general awareness was developed among rural and urban
parents of all social and religious backgrounds of the value of secular or "government" education. This awareness did not always lead to enrollment of children in school, because schools were few and, equally important, the parents needed the children to assist at home in various subsistence or economic activities. Among those parents who did send children to school, the feeling was that their sacrifice was substantial and thereafter any additional responsibilities were to be assumed by the school. With the possible exception of some of the educated parents in the major cities, parental involvement and home-school interaction were minimal or nonexistent. The parents assumed that the government provided all the necessary conditions for teaching their children and that the schools would carry out the necessary tasks as best they could. As in other African countries, the schools themselves usually assumed that the parents knew nothing about schooling and therefore neither expected nor encouraged parents to become involved.

Throughout their first year in Israel, there were social workers, house mothers, and a host of others in the absorption centers who catered to the needs of the Beta Israel children. The Jewish Agency provided the necessary material support. The parents came to assume that it was the responsibility of the government which they considered magnanimous and generous. When they left the absorption centers, they were not prepared to participate in the education of their children. After one year in Israel, they were expected to clothe their children in decent materials; to purchase exercise books, pens, pencils, and gym outfits; and to pay small fees for incidental items such as bus fare for class trips. The parents refused. They considered the expectations and demands placed upon them by the school personnel as efforts by local bureaucrats to stand in the way of the government’s delivery of services to their children. To further complicate the situation, when parents were asked to attend meetings or conferences at the school, they shied away. School personnel and government officials interpreted this to mean that the parents were detached from or otherwise indifferent to their children’s education. These misunderstandings led to acrimonious conflicts which continue to polarize the homes and schools.

Beta Israel parents lack traditions of participation or involvement in the education of their children. They are intimidated by the new environment, and they do not have the language facilities to express themselves or otherwise communicate with school personnel. Some schools use children to facilitate communication, while others prefer
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to use adult interpreters whom, as noted earlier, the parents do not trust. Moreover, their own young children, those ten years of age and younger, are forgetting their native tongue as quickly as they are learning Hebrew. Parent-child communication is becoming increasingly difficult—further intimidating the parents. School personnel do not fully appreciate the dynamics of these difficulties. The parents are very limited in what they can do, materially and emotionally, in the new environment. Appreciation of these problems by school personnel and government officials is an important first step. Another temporary solution to the dilemma is for the school to provide additional tutoring, study facilities, and so on, for these children to compensate for deficiencies in the home.

SUMMARY

Primary education for Beta Israel children is provided primarily under the aegis of the state religious system. Provisions are made for the parents to exercise their right to enroll their children in the state secular system, but few do so. This suggests either that the parents are satisfied with the state religious schools or that they do not fully appreciate the differences.

Most Beta Israel children are participating in education, in either segregated or integrated classrooms. At this juncture, the pressing question is what conditions benefit the Beta Israel children most. Arguments can be made for both approaches. For those students whose needs are such that they would benefit from, and in fact receive, more focused instruction and intensive support in a segregated learning environment, there is merit in continuing this practice. If their learning, at least in certain areas, would be enhanced in an integrated situation, then that also should be made available.

At this time, the secular and religious systems of education are rivals. The religious schools are most concerned with the precepts and rituals of religion, which may be an important component of education for the children of a people who have been cut off from mainstream Judaism for centuries. However, for intellectual stimulation and cognitive development, the quality of instruction in the secular schools appears to have more to offer. Yet such differences are hardly appreciated on behalf of the education of most of the children. An
independent advocating body that understands the situation and is acceptable to all parties concerned should be found to look after the matter. The education of the migrant children is so important that it cannot be left to the petty whims of politics.

In view of the fact that most Beta Israel families are under severe pressure arising from their dislocation and disorientation, parent substitutes, without physical removal from the home, should be considered on behalf of the children to whatever extent possible.