For Our Soul

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The Ethiopian Jews were, of course, not the first olim to come to Israel. In a state conceived and built around the idea of providing a home for all Jews in the Diaspora, even before its creation in 1948, mechanisms and institutions were put in place to encourage and facilitate the arrival, settlement, and continued survival of Jewish immigrants. Beginning in 1882, small and large waves of immigrants, a vast majority of them from Europe, have been arriving in Palestine. Since the formation of the state in 1948, even larger waves of Jewish immigrants continued to arrive, primarily from the developing regions of Asia and Africa. The rate of immigration reached its peak in the early 1950s with the arrival of thousands of Jews from northern Africa and Asia. The Ethiopians were the last of the large waves of immigrants from the developing part of the world. In fact, by the 1970s, the rate of immigration from the traditional sources of Europe, Asia, and other parts of Africa was tapering off very drastically, with the result that institutions, facilities, and personnel had become idle. Therefore, when the Ethiopians began to arrive, they could not have done so at a more opportune time. Addressing this topic, the dynamic director of Youth Aliyah,
Uri Gordon, was prompted to declare that “this was the era of the Ethiopians.”

The two waves of Beta Israel that immigrated to Israel between 1980 and 1985 (or most of others since, for that matter) were not selected based on any criteria other than their desire to come and their willingness and ability to endure the long, arduous process of leaving home, traveling to the camps in third countries, and eventually reaching their destination in Israel. Thus came people who were young and old, preliterate and literate. The vast majority were people of peasant background who had never before ventured beyond their immediate communities; they were devout but unlettered people. They came from parts of Ethiopia unexposed to outside influences, where modern means of communication, commerce, and education were very undeveloped, to settle in Israel, a technologically and scientifically advanced Western society with no previous experience with people from sub-Saharan Africa claiming to be Jews and entitled to set up homes in the Holy Land. The Israeli authorities had ample time to prepare for the arrival and reception of the Ethiopian Jews long before they were overwhelmed by events in the 1980s.

IMMIGRANT RECEIVING CENTERS

The policy, now formulated, was to take the immigrants to receiving centers in two stages before they were released into the larger society. This policy took into account the very poor physical and mental condition of the Ethiopians at the time of arrival and their peasant background. The need to educate the Israeli public about the Ethiopians in such a way as to minimize, if not totally forestall, formation of negative impressions was also recognized. Therefore, the decision was made to settle the immigrants in sheltered centers until they had mastered at least the rudiments of Hebrew and met the basic requirements of setting up home in the context of Israel.

It was also anticipated that through the utilization of the media, the Israeli public would come to know and appreciate these Zionists who had suffered so much for the sake of their faith and Jewish culture. As will be detailed later, considerable effort was made to depict the Ethiopians as heroic, which they were, but, more importantly, as a
people who for centuries had longed to be united with their coreligionists in Jerusalem. Moreover, they were presented as a people who considered themselves aliens in Ethiopia, seldom participating or wanting to participate voluntarily in the development or protection of their land of origin. Their languages—Ge'ez, Amharic, Tigrigna, or any of the others—were depicted as uniquely their own. In other words, the Ethiopians and their Jewishness were packaged and presented in a way that resembled the historical conditions experienced by Jews in Europe, the Soviet Union, and to some extent in Arab countries in the hope that the Israeli public would understand and identify with them.

While this was going on, the immigrants were living in sheltered or absorption centers, where they could be prepared for gradual release to their own apartments in communities throughout Israel. The hope and expectation were that eventually they would become accepted as functioning and contributing members of such communities like any other immigrant group. This was the objective.

There was some recognition, nevertheless, that for some time to come, the immigrants would be receiving far more than they could give to the local communities, which would have some problems accepting them. Therefore, efforts would be made not to place too many immigrants (in proportion to the veterans) in a given apartment block, neighborhood, or town. The authorities did appreciate, overall, the magnitude of the task at hand. For "by its very nature . . . a comprehensive long-term [plan] that seeks to grant destitute immigrants a basis for integration in the normal Israeli life is expected to be costly." 2 By all accounts, indeed, the Ethiopian immigrants, have been the most costly olim.

The coming of the immigrants was the responsibility of the Israeli government at the first level. The assistance of international Jewish organizations and other governments such as that of the United States were crucial at certain stages of the process but not indispensable. It was imperative that many of the governmental agencies such as the ministries of foreign affairs, interior, absorption, labor and social welfare and the security apparatus play their respective and unique roles efficiently. But once the immigrants were in Israel, and at least for the duration of their first year, the responsibility for their processing and welfare was that of the quasi-governmental Jewish Agency for Israel (JA). After the immigrants had completed their year at the absorption centers, the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption would move to center stage. Assisted to some extent by other private organizations such as
the Joint Distribution Committee, and in cooperation with other relevant governmental departments, the Ministry of Absorption assumed responsibility for coordinating the immigrants' housing, training, employment, and socialization functions.

At the initial stage, they were received in a care center known as the Absorption and Sorting Base. Here, the immigrants were identified, registered, and assigned new Hebrew names, authorities having decided this would resolve immediate and long-term problems for the absorbing society and the immigrants. The 1984–85 arrivals also were reconverted (they had to go through symbolic circumcision in the case of males and immersion in water for all), reunited with families if any, and in general allowed time to recover from the hardships they had experienced. Immigrants were provided with clothing, medical care and were otherwise prepared for referral to other centers. Immigrants could stay from a few days to up to three months, depending on their readiness and the availability of proper absorption centers. When they stayed longer, they were taught Hebrew and learned housekeeping and some rudiments of life in Israel. Except for some organizational difficulties, according to those who had a chance to evaluate the procedures and accomplishments, the quality of care and reception provided was very good. At the next stage, however, when the immigrants were to pass a year in absorption centers before being placed in permanent quarters, there developed organizational, administrative, and personnel problems that would affect the quality and efficiency of the absorption processes and would have serious consequences for the immigrants in the first instance and the absorbing society in the second.

During the period of this study, there were more than thirty-three centers of absorption scattered throughout Israel and at least one on the West Bank. In most instances, immigrants stay for only about five to six months in absorption centers, but in the case of the Ethiopians, this was extended to about a year. The Ethiopians, it was recognized, were unique cases in the annals of immigration to Israel. They had long been separated from the bulk of the Jewish people and their history. They came from a traditional, developing society to an industrialized, Western society, and there existed a huge gap in all aspects of life-styles between the two. Their deteriorated physical and mental conditions rendered them unfit to confront life in the new society.

Another set of factors that needs to be considered is the crumbling family structure that began en route and continued after arrival.
Setting Up Home

But perhaps what set the Ethiopians apart from the other Israelis most of all was their color—their blackness. The Yemenites and the Benei Israel (Jews from India), who had preceded them in coming to Israel, are darker than most of the other Israelis, but the Ethiopians, or at least most of them, stood out much more because of the color of their skin. These were some of the Ethiopians' differentiating characteristics to be taken into account when planning for their absorption in Israel.

The objective, then, was to create conditions that would bring the two groups gradually together. The immigrants were to be prepared for the requirements of the absorbing society at the absorption centers. They were then to be placed in permanent settlements that would allow the continuation of communal life but avoid the creation of "ethnic pockets," as had happened with earlier immigrants from Asia and Africa. The immigrants ultimately would be placed in areas neither too strong (from the point of view of culture and economics) nor too weak, and dispersed among the absorbing local communities. In other words, the objective was to maximize interaction between the immigrants and the members of the local communities without jeopardizing communal life or straining the capacities of the local communities to handle the absorption of immigrants. That is why it was imperative to plan the stages of absorption at different levels carefully and to monitor them closely.

The immigrants who arrived between 1980 and 1984 were accommodated by themselves in centers that were empty. However, when the number of immigrants increased because of Operation Moses, other temporary shelters such as hotels and guest houses were used. But when it became clear that the latter type of accommodation was not suitable, attempts were made to place the immigrants in existing centers alongside immigrants from other countries. What emerged from the various arrangements in the fall of 1985 was the following: 5,377 Beta Israel were placed in seventeen centers owned by the Jewish Agency; 2,552 were placed in nine centers made up of hotels and guest houses; and seventeen other centers accommodated another 2,552 Beta Israel mixed with other immigrants. Most of the immigrants were accommodated in centers of their own.

Different categories of personnel were recruited and deployed in the centers. They included veteran Ethiopians (vatikim) who acted as interpreters and instructors and served as effective bridges between the newcomers, the care givers, and the local society. Homemakers, recruited from the local community, guided the immigrants in ways

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of life, health, and household management, a service absolutely es-

sential for the newcomers. The most important groups of profes-
sional personnel were the social workers and the medical practition-
ers (nurses and doctors) who worked under the supervision of a
center director. Later on, other professionals such as anthropologists
and psychologists were added. These constituted the core group of
personnel whose skills or lack thereof molded the nature of at least
the initial processes of adaptation and absorption of the immigrants.
In other words, the immigrants were entirely dependent on the skills,
knowledge, and attitude of the personnel assembled to guide them
through the strangeness of their new environment. At this stage, the
immigrants were taught in ulpanim (formal and informal centers for
learning the Hebrew language) the rudiments of Hebrew, how to set
up homes using unfamiliar utensils and furniture, how to shop, how
to manage the household budget, how to prepare meals using local
ingredients, and the many other things vital to existence in a modern
society. As the immigrants learned skills that would help them to sur-
vive, they also acquired and developed attitudes toward life in Israel,
mostly as reflected through the people they came in daily contact
with—the care providers at the absorption centers. Before examining
the degree of success these people had, as seen from the immigrants’
point of view, let us review some of the accomplishments primarily
from the organizational and administrative points of view. 6

At the height of the initial absorption activity, there were about
one thousand employees of the Jewish Agency, both permanent and
contractual, some working in the headquarters but most in the field
working with the immigrants. About eighty were social workers, 113
were instructor-interpreters (veteran Ethiopians), and the rest were
teachers, house mothers, block supervisors, health-care providers,
and so on. In their respective spheres of responsibility, these people
were the gatekeepers between the new immigrants and the veteran
society. Most of them did a commendable job, working hard to es-

tabliah good relations with the immigrants and to gain their confi-
dence. The social workers were especially commended by both the
immigrants and official reports. The instructor-interpreters had a
number of problems with the immigrants, as will be described. But
there were also serious oversights that could have been avoided or,
once apparent, could have been corrected earlier, whose effects were
untoward for the immigrants as well as those working with them.

There had been no comprehensive search within the Jewish
Agency to identify people with qualifications and experience in immi-
grant absorption, although such people did exist. Nor was the possibility considered of recruiting retired employees who had extensive experience in absorption of immigrants. They were not even asked to work as volunteers. The steps taken to recruit workers were not made public, the positions were not advertised, and the recruiting committee was drawn mostly from junior employees. Such shortcomings also applied to the recruitment of the most crucial persons, the directors of the absorption centers. The result was that quite a number of unqualified persons were retained which resulted in several disturbances, including open demonstrations by the immigrants in a number of centers. The homemakers, who were recruited locally, on the whole seem to have worked hard and effectively. But even here, when the internal organization in the absorption center was deficient, the homemakers were not adequately utilized.

At another level, conflicts occurred within the absorption centers among the professional and staff people as well as people working under one of the two wings of the Jewish Agency. There was confusion regarding the lines of command. The homemakers and instructor-interpreters were moved from one line of command to the other so frequently that they became confused. Lack of sufficient orientation at the start of employment regarding the nature of their charges and the policy of JA and absence of guidance once on the job may have contributed to the failure of some of the directors. Of course, the JA department responsible for the immigrants pointed out that, among other things, they could not have announced many of their efforts to the public because the arrival of the immigrants was necessarily secret. This is true, but it does not explain all the shortcomings of those efforts over a relatively long time. It seems traditional bureaucratic inertia, narrow self-interest, and red tape were at work full-time, despite the most urgent and important needs of the immigrants.

The immigrants, then, had to go through the experiences of the absorption centers. The ways and conventions of the new society had to be learned gradually, and during the process the immigrants were to be accommodated so that their encounters with the larger society would not be awkward for either side. There were many obvious advantages to this concept, but important questions remain. How much time should have been spent at this stage? What might have been the optimal mix of shelter and exposure to the real environment so that adaptation could begin? These are hard questions, and this study provides no answer for them. What might be said here is that living in the absorption centers entailed a dependence on the care providers for
even routine duties (shopping, getting children ready to go to school, being escorted to the clinics and banks, etc.) incompatible with steady progress toward adaptation. Postponing the time when reality has to be faced creates more dependency, distorts family structure, precludes interactions with local people, and might lead the immigrants to think that their sheltered existence and the provisions made on their behalf were normal and would last indefinitely.

The JA was challenged for not asking whether the premises on which the absorption center concept was based were tenable. At one stage, there was a conflict among members of the two major ethnic groups (Amhara and Tigray) in one of the absorption centers in the Negev which led the authorities to remove some of them to regular apartments. Later follow-up revealed that the people mainstreamed earlier had made faster progress toward adaptation than those who stayed behind. The agency was criticized for not following up on that experiment by trying to mainstream as early as possible most of the rest of the immigrants.7

Unfortunately, the care providers apparently did not encourage their charges to lead increasingly independent lives (which would have made their services unnecessary). Instead, the immigrants became more and more dependent on such personnel, even to the point of seeking authorization to leave camp. When some of these untoward side effects were revealed and the agency was criticized for them, it wanted to terminate its role and responsibilities. This created additional problems and further complicated the issues.

In the winter of 1986, the Jewish Agency announced termination of its operation of the absorption centers, saying it was time for the Absorption Ministry and others to locate the immigrants in permanent houses. The agency said the original plans called for the immigrants to stay in temporary centers for only about a year, and that period was over. Further, the agency had run out of money, and the immigrants were becoming too dependent on the care providers of the centers. As long as they stayed in absorption centers, had their bills paid and stipends delivered on time, and sought and received direction from the care providers before making any simple move, the immigrants would never be able to stand on their own, negating the fundamental objective of gradual adaptation to Israel. The agency's termination of its role included removal of the telephones, mailboxes, furniture, and utensils on which the immigrants had come to
rely. No alternatives were provided. The agency wanted to get out quickly and dismissed practically all workers, except a few social workers in some of the centers. The residents as well as most of the workers protested the agency's sudden decision to withdraw, saying the move would create hardships for the immigrants and that more time was needed to make the transition—but to no avail.

To determine if there were motives other than the stated ones for this sudden decision, I interviewed different people I thought were in positions to know. One senior official of the agency's department responsible for the centers gave the following account of the sudden withdrawal. It is true that there had been an agreement among the governmental bodies that the agency would get out at the end of the first year or before, but the real reason was that the immigrants' situation was becoming increasingly afflicted with problems and controversies and was not a glamorous front-page news story anymore. Instead, the news media were carrying accounts of strikes, fights, and similar stories of rancor among the immigrants, between the immigrants and certain sectors of care providers, and among the various categories of workers. So it was decided to get out at once. For whatever reasons, this informant added, there was no doubt that this decision created a lot of problems for the Absorption Ministry, which had to get in now and assume the many challenges, and for the workers and olim. Other administrators supported the agency's move, saying that continuation of the efforts would have served neither the interests of the immigrants nor those of the absorbing society. The Ethiopians were receiving distorted impressions of Israel, they said. The overall reaction was that the agency had to pull out sometime anyway and it already had met its contractual obligations. They did regret that the agency did not see fit to give advance warning so that adequate provisions could have been made for all concerned. More than half of the immigrants were still in the centers, and for them the abrupt weaning was a shock and suggested that they were being punished for things done or undone by others over which they had no control. The immigrants were disappointed or bitter about the decision. Most seemed to blame the lower echelon staff in the agency for prompting the action. It is still too early to find out what impact this action had on the process of adaptation. The possibility that it may result in psychological regression for the immigrants cannot be ruled out.
FOR OUR SOUL

MEASURING SUCCESS

For most of the Ethiopian Jews, 1986-87 (which coincided with my fieldwork) was a year of gojo mewttat, or establishing a home, striking out on their own. Usually, the term is used in connection with a married son living with his wife in his parents' household until he is financially and otherwise secure. When the time comes to set up his own home, he does so with the blessing and support of his parents. The new home usually is established on the same premises as that of his parents. The transition from being an integral part of the family to becoming fully independent takes place gradually. In Israel, the immigrants applied the expression gojo mewttat to their situation, which at first sounded strange for adults but on second thought was quite appropriate. They were striking out on their own for the first time. This was also the beginning of the test of their readiness, of the adequacy of their preparation during the previous year(s) at the absorption centers. For the first time since their arrival in Israel, they were confronted with choices in housing, employment, training, and schooling; they were expected to pay grocery and utility bills fully and on time, travel to the municipalities without an escort, pay taxes, and otherwise forge their niche in the larger community. This was also the year most of the school-age children were mainstreamed into the regular schools and began to interact with members of the absorbing society. For the parents, this was another challenge. They were now expected to encounter not only the teachers and administrators of the schools but, through the schools, the general adult population. New sets of rules, procedures, and activities had to be followed by both the children and their parents. The extent to which the immigrants would be able to perform the myriad routines of daily life in the new society independent of center supervision could be considered a measure of the effectiveness of the absorption program and immigrant adaptation.

Arrangement for housing and permanent settlement were high on the list of priorities. For this, the Absorption Ministry required the coordinated efforts of the various ministries, including housing, finance, and labor. The cooperation of the immigrants was also very crucial, especially in light of their natural desire to stay near relatives and close friends. The government wanted to disperse the immigrants
among Israeli communities that were neither too weak nor too strong and where different ethnic groups and persons of different ages and marital status are represented in a way that the olim could maintain some relations among themselves. Strong communities would be too much for the immigrants to cope with, since the class structure would make the immigrants feel inadequate; communities that were too weak, however, would be unable to help immigrants make the necessary progress toward independence and long-term well-being. Access to good schools and opportunities for employment were part and parcel of the prerequisites taken into account.

As sound and as logical as these objectives appeared, when it came time to implement them, other practical problems emerged, most of which had to do ultimately with money, though that was not the only problem. For instance, there were empty apartments built earlier for other immigrants which had been empty for some time. Because of their location, nobody wanted to live in them. Some were located where there were no possibilities for employment; others were located in weak communities. The Absorption Ministry tried to urge the building of additional structures at the desired locations but was told by the Housing Department and the Jewish Agency that there were no funds to do this. Negotiations among the various agencies resulted in considerable compromise, and the final outcome was not always what was desirable. Finally, some of the absorption centers were converted into permanent settlements. Large groups of immigrants were thus settled in communities of their own, thereby abandoning the goal of integrating them into the larger Israeli society. Others remained in the absorption centers on a temporary basis while the search continued for permanent apartments. Still others were placed in permanent apartments according to the original plans. As time passed, differences in the progress toward goals of absorption and adaptation of the groups settled in these different ways became apparent.

Setting up home, or gojo meuttat, proved difficult for many of the immigrants. During the absorption period at the centers, social workers and others had assumed many of the family’s responsibilities. The image of destitute immigrants that had been presented on television when the immigrants first arrived left an overwhelming emotional impact on the minds of the public. As a consequence, many people had volunteered to work for free, others for nominal pay, and still others as full-time employees to help the immigrants. Naturally the tendency was for these well-intentioned people to do too much for
too long, depriving the immigrants of the opportunity to learn to do things for themselves and thereby gradually become self-reliant. When the time came, serious problems developed. For one thing, the Ethiopians had no idea about Israeli expectations. They could not anticipate what they should or should not do on those rare occasions when they encountered outsiders. More importantly, this was the year the children of the immigrants were sent to schools attended by other Israeli children. Here was a critical test of the level of understanding the Ethiopian and veteran Israeli populations had of each other and of how effectively they could work together to resolve issues without the mediation of absorption center personnel.

For instance, in one of the largest centers where some Ethiopians still were waiting to be assigned permanent apartments and where others already had settled, I heard a lot of complaints from the teachers, social workers, and school administrators that the Ethiopian parents were not participating, as any parent should, in preparing and sending their children to school on time. They complained that the Ethiopian children often came to school untidy, ill clothed, ill shoed (barefoot or in sandals even in winter), with unwashed faces, runny noses, and some with shaved heads. This shocked Israelis especially when they saw sores on the child's head which might have been one of the reasons for shaving. Further, the children were said to be full of lice, disorganized in personal appearance, coming to school without notebooks or school bags, and often lethargic, perhaps indicating lack of proper rest the previous night. The Israelis felt the Ethiopian parents did not care how their children presented themselves or, more generally, were disinterested in the overall well-being of their children, including their education. In an achievement-oriented society such as Israel, they argued, this kind of behavior was intolerable. Such complaints were so frequent, intense, and widespread that in one instance I asked the head volunteer social worker at one of the large centers who spoke some Amharic and was well accepted by the Ethiopian community as well as the school authorities if she could arrange for me to talk to the parents in groups. A month or so later, on December 8, 1986, I was again in the area and made the same request. In a matter of thirty minutes, a meeting was arranged. The social worker, some of her colleagues, and I met with the Ethiopians in a packed hall with some overflowing into the corridors. Parents and nonparents, young and old came. Most of the people either had seen or heard of me before in different contexts in both Ethiopia and Israel, so they had a fairly good idea of what I was doing.
I briefly introduced myself, highlighting my background, experiences, and work in Ethiopia and the United States. I told them I was a visiting professor at the Hebrew University for a year. I added that I was at this meeting to tell them what the complaints against them were and to serve as an honest broker by listening to their side of the story which, if they so wished, I would convey to the authorities on their behalf. Then I presented the litany of complaints I had heard leveled against them. From the beginning, it was apparent to me that the people present were starving to talk to someone in their own language, especially someone they saw as being of some consequence. I spelled out what I had heard already and let them respond to the charges. I had not expected their reactions to be as serious, heartfelt, and articulate as they were. As happens often in such gatherings, a few tended to talk more than others. But speak they did, for the better part of two hours. From what I observed, there was no inhibition on their part, which is also a measure of their adaptation, since they felt that they could express their anger against the authorities without fear of retribution.

At the root of their problems was a lack of money. Whether they are employees or pensioners, their income was not sufficient for their many needs. They were unable to purchase new clothing for themselves or their children and certainly had no money for parties. Some of their clothing had been handed to them at the time of arrival more than a year earlier. As far as the complaint about their parties was concerned, there were no parties. In accordance with their customs, at the time of merdo, the breaking of the news of the death of a family member in Ethiopia; at gizret, the circumcision of a child; at tezkar, the remembrance of a dead relative; or, at the time of weddings, the death of a relative or close friend, and the birth of a child in the family, friends and family members get together to mourn or rejoice over the event. Usually, each adult contributes either food, soft drinks, or money. The expenses are small and distributed among the family and friends. These occasions make it possible for them to get together and give one another emotional support. They asserted that these were some of the cultural components they cherished and were not willing to give up. "These are the things we used to do in our country. We are not ready to abandon them. As it is, we have modified many of our customs already. Enedenu mehon anfelgim bet ze-gitew yemibelu; yenesun bahrye memar anfeligim. [Amharic: "We do not want to be like those who close their doors when they eat—meaning they are uncaring." ] We do not want to learn their culture."
"We [here] are oppressed people," another elder added.

It was apparent they felt unjustly treated and were going to demand redress for their grievances. At one stage, the settlers had been promised that people with large families would be able to buy washing machines at reduced prices. As instructed, they filled out the forms. A few months later, they were told to come again and fill out another set of forms because the former ones had been lost. They filled out the second set. But the promised machines did not arrive. The people continue to hand-wash their clothes in an environment that is not suitable (back in Ethiopia, they also washed their clothes by hand, but in the rivers where the natural contours and stones were more suitable). The result is that they cannot wash the clothes as often as necessary. In the winter, it takes longer to dry them, and they do not have enough clothing for changes.

The adults also had been told they would receive some clothing if they came to the centers and signed some forms. They did. Later they were told they would receive the clothing through the local schools. When they reported to the schools, they were told that the money intended for clothing had been used instead to purchase school supplies for the children. (Actually, the clothing had been donated for the Ethiopians by persons and organizations outside Israel. The local authorities, I was told later, decided to sell the clothing and use the money to purchase school supplies. This is directly related to the complaint that the parents were unwilling to invest money on behalf of their children for school-related expenses. One way of getting the money was to use the proceeds from the sales of donated clothing. Obviously, the parents were furious that they had been given a runaround and were not trusted to handle their own affairs. The immigrants, in fact, strongly suspected that the money from the proceeds went into the pockets of local officials and that this was not the first time that had happened. They repeated that the local officials were dishonest, including the very detested astergwami (Amharic for “veteran”) Beta Israel instructor-interpreters. The immigrants were convinced that other food and clothing which had been sent for them from abroad had been appropriated by the local authorities and interpreters.

Several of the speakers repeatedly emphasized how their lack of language proficiency worked against them and how the local authorities were getting away with murder. They said this was the first chance they had had to express themselves collectively and fully in their own language. For this they were grateful.
They moved to the provision of day-care, another point of contention a number of the younger parents complained about. One young father of two small children related that the local day-care center had a policy of accepting only one child per family and that there was no other center in town for his other child to attend. What could he do with the second child? The mother, when she does not work outside the home, has to take care of household duties, including doing the laundry by hand. They needed to find a place for the child.

The immigrants also complained that they were ignored when they went to visit the clinics. Other people, they said, were given priority by the health-care providers. Sometimes, after spending an entire day waiting for treatment, they would be told to go home and try again tomorrow. They said they also were denied ambulance services even when there were emergencies such as childbirth and acute cardiac attack. One elderly woman added that it was because of their religion that they suffered this kind of indignity and insult. She meant that if it were not for their religion, they would not have come to Israel.

In brief, the immigrants had come to distrust the local authorities as well as the employees of the Ministry of Absorption and the Jewish Agency. Immigrants questioned the intentions and actions of these personnel. They also questioned their integrity in matters of finance. (There were a few exceptions, and most of them were volunteers.) They emphasized that the money they either earned or received from pensions was very inadequate. Without articulating why, they thought they deserved better treatment than what they were getting. It should be recalled that this was their first year out of the absorption centers and for most of them their first attempt at independent living, gojo mewttat. Some were still waiting for permanent housing. Their condition may be described as one of transition. Their bitterness and anger emanated from their experiences in the absorption centers as well as their first year of independent living. They related their experiences to me with deep feeling, clear thinking, and great eloquence. Even as a native speaker of Amharic, intimately familiar with the manner of thinking and speech of the people, I was profoundly moved by the way they were able to express their thoughts and experiences. I only wished that the authorities could hear them as I did.

Unfortunately, because the authorities do not understand Amharic or Tigrigna and are unfamiliar with the immigrants’ culture, they, as well as the Israeli public and even the care providers, see the Ethiopians as awkward and incompetent as they try to do things for themselves in everyday life. Had they heard what I did that evening, they
would have understood the Ethiopian olim much better; more importantly, they would have accorded them much more respect than they have done so far. It is apparent that the local authorities acted on the assumption that the immigrants were, for the most part, simple folks of peasant background who would not and could not understand much of what was good for them. Consequently, the authorities seem to feel that whatever decisions were made on their behalf should have been accepted, even appreciated. I find it hard to believe that corrupt practices by local representatives are as prevalent as the immigrants report, but at the same time, the appearances of corruption are there. If clothing had been sent to the people, they should have participated in decisions regarding its fair distribution or alternative uses. What transpired was that since the immigrants were allegedly wasting money on “partying” (which was a misunderstanding of their concepts and practices) and seemed unwilling to contribute money for extracurricular activities and school supplies, the authorities took it upon themselves to sell the clothes and use the proceeds to purchase the needed items. Apparently, no effort was made to account for the money to the satisfaction of the immigrants. Misperceptions ensued which in turn solidified into mistrust and confrontations.

Following the meeting, I briefed the non-Amharic-speaking workers who had helped organize the meeting and were present throughout the lengthy discussion. They told me they were electrified by the way the grievances were articulated. On the following morning, I traveled to the other side of town to meet with the regional representatives of the ministry and the Jewish Agency, including the top administrator in charge of the Ethiopians. At first, she told me how things were moving smoothly in finding housing and employment opportunities for the immigrants. But I told her I was duty-bound to relate to her what I had learned from my previous contacts and especially the meeting from the previous night. She was visibly shaken. Perhaps she was concerned about whether an outsider could be trusted enough to be told all these things. At any rate, she said it was true that they had many problems with both the immigrants and the workers. She also admitted that, because of language problems, some mistreatment, including at the health clinics, might have taken place as described. She and others also admitted that the reports regarding the disposal of clothing were true, though they insisted the proceeds were put to good use in helping children with their education. She added that some of the other complaints also might have been justified. But then she gave her side of the story.
She said the Ethiopian Jews had declared that they want to be Israelis, that they want to learn, and so forth. "We would like to help them achieve those goals," she said. "At times, we find that their wishes are incompatible with what we think is in their long-term interest. They want to live in places such as Petah Tiqva or Hadera where there are already too many Ethiopians. We want them to go where the jobs are and where they can become integrated with veteran Israelis. We urge them to travel with us and visit some of the other places, but most are not willing to move even a distance of a mile. They all want to stay together in this one place. Since the merkaze klita [absorption centers] are not their own, they do not look after them well. After we have told them repeatedly of our positions, they keep coming with the same requests."

"Personally," she continued, "I like to go to their houses to talk to them instead of having them come to the office. But they do not seem comfortable. If they keep coming here, how can I go there? I sit on this side of the table [in her office] and they on the other, and it is not possible to establish rapport, trust, and understanding. But if I do go to their houses, they may expect that they will get everything they want. This is not possible. Administrators have to say no sometimes."

What seems to be working here is a cultural assumption on the part of the immigrants: if you do not get what you want the first time, try again until you convince the official that your cause is justified. Eventually, the official will get tired and grant your wishes. This is known as dejmettinat in Amharic. Literally, it means "waiting at the gate"; in other words, after you have made your request, keep showing up in person at the gate until you succeed. For some, this works even in Israel, but nonetheless the officials get baffled when the Ethiopians do not take no as the final answer.

Regarding the condition of the Ethiopians, this administrator thought there was too much generalization. "They were depicted to us as destitute, poor, and severely persecuted because of their Jewishness. Now we know differently. But the depiction of them as such was helpful in precipitating a lot of dialogue that led to the mobilization of public opinion which in turn led to their coming to Israel."

By way of summary, then, it could be said that the Beta Israel's first year in Israeli society—their new home—was full of challenges and surprises, not all of them pleasant. How these initial experiences will color or influence what lies ahead remains to be seen.