



Educator's Guide

The Secret History of Ethiopian Jews

Educational resources compiled by Sarah Golubtchik

The story of the Beta Israel's return to the Land of Israel is one of broken promises, secret agreements, and the tenacity of an ancient community in the face of unimaginable danger. While the origin story of Ethiopian Jews remains unclear, their courage, faith, and love for the Jewish homeland, along with the daring of the Mossad and the activism of Diaspora Jews, resulted in the return of thousands of Jews to Israel.

[Link to video](#)

Big Ideas

1. Jewish identity is complex and multi-faceted.
2. The desire for self-determination is a key component of communal *aliyah* to Israel.
3. The Ethiopian Jewish community has a rich and valuable history.

Essential Questions

1. What does Jewish identity look like?
2. What role does self-determination play in moving communities of people to Israel?
3. What can we learn from the story of Ethiopian Jewry?

Review Questions

1. The name Beta Israel means:
 - Israel 2.0
 - **House of Israel**
 - Young Israel
 - Lost Israel

2. From whom did the Beta Israel descend?
 - The tribe of Dan
 - Egyptian or Yemenite Jews
 - Israelites who accompanied the song of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba
 - **Any of the above are possible**

3. For nearly 1000 years, the Beta Israel practiced their faith freely, until the _____ invaded:
 - Muslims
 - Hindus
 - **Christians**
 - Greeks

4. The word Falasha means:
 - Weak
 - Loser
 - Follower
 - **Stranger**

5. In 1855, a group of Rabbis in Israel declared that the Beta Israel were:
 - "Lost Tribes"
 - **"Authentic Jews"**
 - "New Jews"
 - "Unwelcome"

6. Jewish organizations helped the Beta Israel by:
 - Sending doctors
 - Setting up schools

- Sending money
 - **All of the above**
- 7.** Ferede Aklum paved the way for the Beta Israel to get to Israel via:
- Egypt
 - **Sudan**
 - Eritrea
 - Libya
- 8.** The Mossad set up a _____ as a decoy in order to smuggle Ethiopian Jews to Israel:
- University
 - Sports center
 - **Diving school**
 - Airport

Discussion Questions

- 1. A team effort?** Throughout its long and rich history, Ethiopian Jewry faced many trials and tribulations, including persecution, isolation, slavery, and forced conversions. Even in times of relative tranquility, however, Ethiopian Jews held onto a strong longing for the Holy Land. Despite this strong desire, and the often dangerous conditions in Ethiopia, many factors precluded their movement to Israel en masse. Ultimately, it was a combination of efforts from the Ethiopian community, North American advocacy, and Israel that allowed for the movement of large amounts of Ethiopian Jews to Israel.
- What role did self-determination play in the unique Zionism of Ethiopian Jews?
 - In what ways did other Jews support the movement of the Beta Israel community to Israel? In what ways did they hinder it?
 - In what ways does the movement of Ethiopian Jews to Israel demonstrate Jewish unity? In what ways does it demonstrate fragmentation?

2. Maintaining Ethiopian Jewish traditions:

Having been separated from the rest of world Jewry for over 2500 years, the Judaism practiced by the Ethiopian Jewish community was very different than the Judaism practiced by the rest of the world. Ethiopian Jews observed biblical Judaism rather than rabbinical Judaism and didn't celebrate holidays like Chanukah and Purim, which mark events that took place after they had already been separated, and of which they were not aware. [Rabbi Dr. Sharon Shalom](#) describes how Ethiopian Jews serve as a genuine source for learning about ancient Jewish philosophy, values, laws, and customs, preserved with little adaptation for over 2,500 years.

- If you were an Ethiopian Jew reuniting with the rest of the Jewish people, would you want to maintain your own way of observing Judaism or would you try to adapt to the rest of world Jewry?
- What can the rest of the Jewish world learn about preserving Judaism from the Ethiopian Jewish community?
- Why is it important to learn about different groups within the Jewish family?

3. What does a Jew look like?

Until the 19th century, the Ethiopian Jewish community believed that they were the only Jews left on earth and that all Jews had black skin.

- When you close your eyes and imagine what a Jew looks like, what do you see? Do certain stereotypes come to mind? If so, why do you think that is the case?
- Did learning about the Ethiopian Jewish community change your perception of how Jews "look"?

Learning Activities

1. Lesson plan:

Use our ready made lesson plan on The Secret History of Ethiopian Jews [HERE](#).

2. Challenges of integration: The Beta Israel's Jewish traditions and practices date back thousands of years. However, since their earliest encounters with other Jews in Israel, their integration into Israeli society at large has been a complex process. In the last decade, there have been numerous protests and [complaints](#)

by Ethiopian-Israelis about lack of opportunity, educational gaps, poverty and [police harassment](#) in Israel. At the same time, Ethiopian-Israelis have made monumental achievements in Israeli society when it comes to [politics](#), [religion](#), the [military](#) and more.

Imagine that you are the mayor of a town where there are many Ethiopian immigrants. Your mission is to create a welcoming environment for everyone. Come up with a five-point plan of action for making your town welcoming, that includes answers to the following questions:

- What are the challenges of immigrating to a new country regardless of one's pre-existing attachment to that place?
- What actions will your town undertake to encourage unity among the different cultural groups in your community?
- How will your town express its cultural diversity?
- What steps will your town take to address issues of racism in your community?

3. Spectrum:

Play "spectrum" with your students. Designate one side of the room as **agree** and the other side as **disagree**. Have them stand along the spectrum where they most identify based on the following statements:

- Israel is responsible for protecting Jews wherever they live.
- Ethiopian Jews practice an authentic form of Judaism.
- Israel should focus more on unity rather than uniformity within its society.
- Ethiopian Jewish culture and traditions are a welcome addition to Israeli society.
- The ingathering of the exiles should be a top priority for the Jewish state.

After moving to where they most agree, students should discuss with the other students there why they chose that area and then open the conversation to the whole group to explain their stances and opinions. Students may change where they stand based on the conversation. This game can be played virtually as well by using the chat function and breakout rooms.

4. Case study - Questioning the Jewishness of Ethiopian Jews:

Upon their arrival in Israel, Ethiopian Jews faced numerous challenges, including the questioning of their Jewish identity by Israeli religious leaders, the dismissal of their customs and laws as inauthentic, and the perception of their traditions as

peculiar and foreign.

Read about the incident at the [Barkan Winery](#) in which the winery questioned the Jewishness of Ethiopian-Israeli workers. Divide the students into small groups, and assign each group one of the following questions to discuss:

- How do we balance how Israel went to great lengths to help facilitate the “ingathering of the exiles” with the fact that many then faced continued discrimination in Israel?
 - How does the questioning of Ethiopian Jews’ Jewish identity by Israeli religious leaders and the initial requirement for precautionary conversions impact their sense of belonging and acceptance within Israeli society?
 - What do you feel is an appropriate response to the Barkan Winery? Would you feel comfortable buying their products after reading this article? With what actions would you respond to this situation?
 - Imagine that a member of Beta Israel from three hundred years ago heard about this story. How do you think they would react?
5. **Make it personal:** The performance of the [song](#) Journey to Israel by Shlomo Gronich and performed by Israeli artist Eden Alene offers a beautiful account of the difficult and often tragic journey that many Ethiopian Jews took in order to arrive in the Land of Israel. Listen to the song (English subtitles and lyrics are available on the youtube site) and choose one of the following:
- Create a piece of visual art that reflects the physical journey and emotional experience described in the song.
 - Choreograph and perform a dance to accompany the music.
6. **Using the art:** Provide each student with a large sheet of paper or a digital platform to create a visual representation or collage of the different layers of identity of the Beta Israel community. They should consider aspects such as:
- i. **Rich history:** Encourage students to depict elements of Ethiopian Jewish history, such as its ability to practice Judaism, its unique form of Zionism, its relationship with Ethiopia at large, its struggle

to get to Israel, and the complex journey many undertook in order to arrive there.

- ii. **Jewish identity:** Students should showcase the unique practices and traditions of Ethiopian Jews, highlighting their observance of biblical Judaism and any customs that set them apart from “mainstream” Jewish practices.
 - iii. **Challenges and experiences:** Ask students to depict the challenges and experiences faced by Ethiopian-Israelis, such as discrimination, cultural adaptation, immigration, and integration. They can use symbols, images, or words to represent these challenges.
 - iv. **Identity intersections:** Encourage students to reflect on the intersectionality of identities within the Ethiopian Jewish community, such as being Jewish, Ethiopian, and Israeli. They can represent these intersections and how they shape the overall identity.
- After completing their artwork, students should present and discuss their creations with the rest of the class. Then, debrief as a class by posing the following questions:
 - i. What was challenging for you about this task? Why was it challenging?
 - ii. What did you learn while creating this project? Are there any areas that you would like to explore further?

7. Kahoot: Play our [Kahoot](#) about The Secret History of Ethiopian Jews!

Reflection Questions

1. Ingathering of the exiles:

Israel’s first president, Chaim Weizmann, said the following: *“Our whole prayer is that this gathering of exiles will increase and embrace an ever-larger multitude of our people, who will strike roots here and work side by side with us in building the state and making our unproductive places fruitful again.”*

- Considering the remarkable diversity of Jewish immigrants coming to Israel from over 100 countries, do you think Israel has been successful in uniting people from vastly different communities and cultures?

- What are three ways to raise awareness about different communities within Israel as we work together to build a more equitable Israel?
- Why do you think Israel places such a high value on aliyah?

2. The origin story of Ethiopian Jews:

There are a variety of theories explaining the origin of the Ethiopian Jewish community. The most popular theory asserts that Ethiopian Jews are descendants of the tribe of Dan. Others argue that the community are descendants of the son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, while others insist that the community descends from Jewish immigrants from Yemen in the between the 2nd and 6th century CE. There are other theories as well.

- Regarding the origin story of Ethiopian Jews, do you believe it matters which of these theories are true? Why or why not?
- What is your Jewish origin story? Where is your family from and what do you know about your own Jewish lineage?

3. Jewish unity:

The late Israeli president, prime minister, and foreign minister Shimon Peres famously said:

"We are one people. There are no black Jews and white Jews. There are Jews. History and faith bind us together, forever."

- How does Shimon Peres's assertion that 'we are one people' challenge and inspire Jewish communities worldwide to foster unity and overcome divisions based on ethnicity or race?"
- What do you think is the common link that unites all Jewish people?

4. Fresh perspectives: What is the most surprising thing that you learned about the history of Ethiopian Jews? What would you like to learn more about?

Further Learning

1. Unpacked for Educators:

- [Ethiopian Jewry](#) (video)
- [Ingathering of Exiles: From Ethiopia to Israel](#) (podcast)
- [Unpacking Operation Solomon, 30 Years Later](#) (article)
- [Exile and the Lost Tribes of Israel](#) (video)
- [Mekonen: The Journey of an African Jew](#) (film)

2. [Ethiopian National Project](#) This initiative was launched to unite Diaspora Jewry, the Government of Israel and the Ethiopian-Israeli community to address the on-going challenges of integration of the Ethiopian-Israeli community into Israeli society, with the full inclusion and leadership of the Ethiopian-Israeli community itself. The ENP has launched a program to address issues between the Israeli police and the Ethiopian-Israeli community. Read excerpts about [Beta Israel Halacha](#) from Rabbi Sharon Shalom's book
3. I24, [The Ethiopian Jews of Israel](#) (video)
4. [The Red Sea Diving Resort](#) (Netflix film about Operation Moses)