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Life between Two Zions:

The Beta Israel and their Experience of Multiple Diasporas

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In academic discussions of diaspora it is common practice to primarily focus on two accepted cases. The first is the Jewish Diaspora which serves as sort of foundational case study and the second is the African Diaspora which animates much of the modern discourse around what geographic or temporal boundaries should restrict a modern definition of diaspora. These communities provide interesting points of contrast, but the utility of comparing the two experiences should not be limited by a window that considers them as mutually exclusive contexts. There are several communities at the intersection of both the African and Jewish Diasporas, but the largest is a community of Ethiopian Jews known as the Beta Israel who have primarily resided in Israel since the 1980s.¹ As a group that is defined by multiple homelands and overlapping oppressions, their experience provides a unique demonstration of the limits and possibilities of diasporic identities in explaining and defining the modern world. In particular, the recent experiences of the Beta Israel draw attention to the limits of essentializing identity,

¹ Hagar Salamon, "Blackness in Transition: Decoding Racial Constructs through Stories of Ethiopian Jews," *Journal of Folklore Research* 40, no. 1 (2003): 3-32.

collective notions of shared oppression, and inert understandings of place. The work of interpreting these implications for a broader understanding of African Diaspora requires an understanding of the Beta Israel's demonstrable history, imagined histories, and the varied societal acceptance of their self-identification. Viewed narrowly, these collective actions tell a historical ethnography. Viewed expansively, the intersectional diasporic identities of the Beta Israel provide an unparalleled view into the ways in which both African and Jewish Diasporas represent constructed modern understandings of place, self, and oppression.

As touched on above, when reconstructing the Beta Israel's narrative it is valuable to create two histories. The first is the history that might be best referred to as verifiable. This is the history documented in primary and secondary sources, pieced together through careful research, and presented as something approaching fact in academic journals. This history is incomplete, but it adheres to the tenants of academic history. This stands in slight contrast with the second history, which in truth is a compilation of a variety of different histories. These are the narratives used to describe the Beta Israel both by external groups and by themselves. Arguably this is a deeper history, and it certainly does at least as well as any academic timeline in describing the identities of the Beta Israel. This organizational division between historical accounts should not be read as an impervious barrier, or as an assertion that the understood history of the Beta Israel is demonstrably false. Instead, the following historical narratives tell different parts of the creation of the Beta Israel as an identity in the present. The respective histories of the Beta Israel constructed by academia and cultural perceptions are permeable, and varied understandings of Ethiopian Judaism have crossed the division repeatedly.

The generally accepted historical account of the Beta Israel starts in the mountains of Ethiopia before the fourth century.² Though there are a variety of academic theories, there is not corresponding proof for any of their proposed origin stories, which range from Yemeni traders who settled in the region to the conversion of Ethiopians by Jews from Egypt, about how Judaism became a part of regional Ethiopian racial and ethnic identifications.³ The Beta Israel, or Falasha as they are referred to in Ethiopia and some scholarship, certainly have a history that predates the earliest documentation of their residence in Ethiopia, but no scholar has found clear and replicable evidence that adequately supports any the theories of exodus used within the Jewish Diaspora and the Beta Israel.⁴ Prior to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries there is little available historical record, written, oral, or otherwise, about the ayhud (Jews) of Ethiopia.⁵ What does exist seems to suggest a fairly dispersed set of identities and geographic locations. Because of the unfortunate dearth of ancient sources, it is easier to begin an academic history in between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. It was during this period that the community that lived in over 500 disparate cities and communities coalesced around a singular shared identity of Falasha or Beta Israel.⁶ It is also during this period that the quantity and quality of available sources rapidly expands.

The central event that consolidated their ethnic identity seems to be a declaration made between 1413 and 1430 by the Ethiopian ruler Yeshaq that only Christian Ethiopians should be

² Abebe Zegeye, "The Construction of the Beta Israel Identity," *Social Identities* 10, no. 5 (2004): 589-618.

³ Steven Kaplan, "Indigenous Categories and the Study of World Religions in Ethiopia: The Case of the Beta Israel (Falasha)," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 22, (1992): 208-21.

⁴ Durrenda Ojanuga, "The Ethiopian Jewish Experience as Blacks in Israel," *Journal of Black Studies* 24, no. 2 (1993): 147-158.

⁵ James Quirin, "Oral Traditions as Historical Sources in Ethiopia: The Case of the Beta Israel (Falasha)," *History in Africa* 20 (1993): 297-312.

⁶ James Quirin, "Caste and Class in Historical North-West Ethiopia: The Beta Israel (Falasha) and Kemant, 1300–1900," *The Journal of African History* 39, no. 2 (1998): 195-220.

allowed to own and inherit land after a military victory over the ayhud militia.⁷ The term Falasha was popularized at the time in part because the phrase ayhud had negative connotations. Falasha meant people in exile, but contemporaneous sources seem to suggest that the term originated from the exile off their owned land in Ethiopia rather than their exile from Judea.⁸ This land seizure was partnered with forced conversions to Christianity in a few extreme cases. Resisting this project of religious erasure, the Falasha concretized differences between Orthodox Christianity and their own practices focused on the Old Testament and supplemental texts specific to their sect.⁹ Up to that point the governing religious law had allowed for fairly open, if occasionally militarily fraught, interactions with Christians, but with the religious codification came religious doctrine that reinforced the separation between the two groups including laws of purity.¹⁰ This fifteenth century pivot also helped establish the traditions of monks, scripture, and oral custom that would preserve the history. After Christian forces accomplished military domination, relations cooled, and Beta Israel were reintegrated into society with a reduced homeland. This meant that they were forced to seek non-agricultural economic options, particularly as artisans.¹¹ Following this period there was a fair degree of stability in the Beta Israel identity as it coalesced around these fifteenth century influences and continued through the sixteenth century Gondar period into the late nineteenth century.

The non-academic historical interpretations of the Beta Israel's early creation utilize some of this same history but are far more invested in concretely explaining the earliest ethnic provenance of the Beta Israel. This means utilizing a different set of accounts to describe and

⁷ Quirin, "Oral Traditions as Historical Sources in Ethiopia," 299.

⁸ Ibid, 300.

⁹ Ibid, 301.

¹⁰ Kaplan, "Indigenous Categories and the Study of World Religions in Ethiopia," 210.

¹¹ Quirin, "Caste and Class in Historical North-West Ethiopia," 195-220.

explain the creation of Ethiopian Jews. There are a wide variety of proposed origins, but by far the most commonly discussed and espoused views are that the Ethiopian Jews are the lost tribe of Dan, the resulting offspring of a relationship between the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon or at least their attendants, or a combination of the two.¹² Both build on an established mythos to create an understanding of place that ties the Beta Israel to a Jewish Zion.¹³ The utilization of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon is interesting because it both builds upon a story common across the Abrahamic tradition and expands a particularly Ethiopian origin mythology.¹⁴ The telling of the Sheba and Solomon story varies, but the basic outline remains the same. The Queen of Sheba is said to have traveled from Aksum, the ancient Ethiopian capital, to Jerusalem to visit King Solomon. This meeting resulted in mutual attraction, and the Queen of Sheba bore their shared child in Ethiopia. This child was named Menelik and later returned to Jerusalem to meet and learn from his father. In most versions of the story, he was accompanied back to Ethiopia by a host of Jewish attendants.¹⁵ It is also a widely held part of Ethiopian cosmology that Menelik was the ancestor of the Ethiopian emperors through Haile Selassie, and this is reflected in a variety of official references to the emperors as members of the house of Solomon.¹⁶ In the versions told by the Beta Israel, the Jewish attendants who returned with Menelik are the broad progenitors of Ethiopian Jews.¹⁷ Interestingly, in some retellings of the Solomon and Sheba story, Melenik takes the Arc of the Covenant to Ethiopia, creating a new Zion in Africa, while in

¹² Steven Kaplan, "Genealogies and Gene-Ideologies: The Legitimacy of the Beta Israel (Falasha)," *Social Identities* 12, no. 4 (2006): 447-455.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Abebe Zegeya, "The Light of Origins: Beta Israel and The Return to Yerusalem," *Religion & Theology* 11, no. 1 (March 2004): 50-70.

¹⁷ Ibid.

other versions Melenik leaves the Arc in Israel creating the long held desire of Ethiopian Jews to return to Israel, a proverbial land of milk and honey.¹⁸

That particular historical tradition, while the primary historical narrative utilized by the Beta Israel for the majority of their recorded history, is no longer espoused by the majority of the community.¹⁹ This is likely because of the consolidation of the Jewish community around explaining the Beta Israel as the lost tribe of Dan. The lost tribes have a complicated province, and interpretations of their whereabouts and the surrounding lore are highly variant across an extremely broad number of traditions.²⁰ There are even modern historians who completely contest the existence of any “lost” tribes. However, the basic premise across most interpretations of the lost tribes is that that ten of the twelve Jewish tribes were expelled from Northern Israel in 722 B.C. by the Assyrians.²¹ The particular interpretation of this legacy used to validate the Judaism of the Bene Israel is the theory that one particular tribe, the tribe of Dan, migrated to Ethiopia where they settled.²² This theory was not common among the Beta Israel until the nineteenth century, but it picked up a legitimacy among other Jewish communities by at least the fifteenth century. This is because of letters sent from a Spanish Rabbi who settled in Egypt that noted the existence of a Jewish community in Ethiopia, and further surmised that this community must be the descendants of the lost Dan tribe of Israel.²³ The lost tribe interpretation of the Beta Israel has since been universalized across the Jewish world with serious ramifications.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Kaplan, "Genealogies and Gene-Ideologies," 450.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ojanagu, 197.

²² Kaplan, "Genealogies and Gene-Ideologies," 451.

²³ Ibid.

After establishing the basic pre-modern history of the Beta Israel, the implications of their identities and histories for a broader understanding of diaspora begins to come into focus as a method of contesting singular understandings of place and diaspora. In describing members of the African or Jewish Diaspora it is not uncommon to define diaspora by a desire to return and the establishment of identity around only a new place of residence and a singular past homeland. The academically documented history of the Beta Israel might not be able to ascertain the group's origin, but what is clear, especially given that the name Falasha stems from their dispossession within Africa, is that the community had experienced multiple diasporic events, both real and imagined, prior to the modern era. This diasporic experience was the direct cause of tangible oppression, in large part because of their Jewish faith. However, when naming their experiences, the Falasha used shifting stories that sought to establish different connections to power. When the Beta Israel resided in Ethiopia they used an origin story that established a connection between themselves and the emperor of the country, despite being members of a disparaged class. When close ties to a broader Jewish community began to become more important, they utilized a story shared with the broader Jewish community that validated their inherent belonging to the group. This is not meant to suggest a calculated selection of diasporas occurred, but it does suggest that the overlap of diasporic identities allowed for a degree of flexibility in defining the self and a homeland. There might not have been a purposeful effort to either locate in the arc of the covenant in Ethiopia or Jerusalem, but the shift in the stories' location of Zion suggests an ability to shift the primary diaspora the Beta Israel connected to as it became necessary.

After the consolidation of the Beta Israel identity through the end of the 16th century, and the Jewish interpretation of the Ethiopian population as descendants of the lost tribe of Dan at the

same time, the next meaningful evolution in the identity of Ethiopian Jews as a diaspora occurred in the late eighteenth hundreds. Starting then the identity of the Beta Israel became a source of active cross-cultural engagement rather than a topic of separate and individualized discussion. The 1800s had been broadly turbulent in Ethiopia, causing death, famine, and the general destruction of property to include Beta Israel houses of worship. This unrest was greatly reduced by the coronation of a new king in 1855, and by 1860 the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews felt comfortable sending missionaries for the first time to convert Jewish Ethiopians.²⁴ This European Missionary work resulted in two substantive impacts for Ethiopian Jews. The first, and more immediately important, was that significant pressures were applied to the Ethiopian Jewish community to convert to Christianity.²⁵ The pressure did not immediately result in significant conversions, in truth only about 2,000 Jews converted over the entire course of European missionary work becoming what was and is called the Falash Mura, the attempts at conversion pointed to a larger ideological threat.²⁶ The Beta Israel had maintained a somewhat contentious relationship with Ethiopian rulers since their subjugation in the fifteenth century. The introduction of new Christian proselytizing threatened at the possibility of Ethiopian rulers deciding cooperation with the Jewish community was no longer important and would begin enforcing forced conversion.²⁷ This concern turned out to be unfounded, but the place of the Beta Israel in the world was still substantively changed by the second impact of Christian missions.

²⁴ Don Seeman, "The Question of Kinship: Bodies and Narratives in the Beta Israel-European Encounter (1860-1920)," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 30, no. 1 (2000): 86-120.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Daniel Friedmann, "The Case of the Palas Mura," in *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel: Studies on the Ethiopian Jews*, edited by Tudor Parfitt and Emanuela Trevisan (New York: Routledge, 2013), 84-94.

The missionary work taken up by Christians in Ethiopia represented the first cohesive recognition of the Beta Israel as a modern part of the Jewish Diaspora.²⁸ Though their intent was to convert Ethiopian Jews, their efforts drew the attention of European Jews, who rekindled their connection to Ethiopia.²⁹ This resulted in ethnographic surveys of the Beta Israel in order to determine their Judaism. By and large, the ethnographers working on behalf of various European Jewish organizations verified the Beta Israel as Jewish, and new initial linkages and connections were created between the two groups. One particular surprise to come out of this interlinkage of the Jewish diaspora was the fact that the Beta Israel seemed to have been unaware of the existence of white Jews.³⁰ They had conceived themselves a singular community without other diasporic equivalents. Over the next century the Beta Israel were slowly pressured to accept the standardized aspects of Judaism practiced by both the Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews. However, the connection between the Beta Israel and other Jewish Communities would be abruptly interrupted by unrest and famine in Ethiopia and war in Europe for the majority of the following century.

The diasporic implications of these early modern interactions are not quite as unique as the ancient creation of the Beta Israel, but they still contain lessons about the role of external actors in creating diaspora and hint at the negatives of existing within multiple diasporic roles. For the first of these lessons, the role of the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews is particularly interesting in that the goal of the organization was focused on actively removing the cultural markers that the global Jewish community would have recognized in the Beta Israel. Simultaneously, it was only through this attempted erasure that Jewish interest in

²⁸ Seeman, "The Question of Kinship," 87.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Jon G. Abbink, "Ethnic Trajectories in Israel: Comparing the 'Bené Israel' and 'Beta Israel' Communities, 1950-2000," *Anthropos* 97, no. 1 (2002): 3-19.

Ethiopia was rekindled. This seems to strengthen the idea that external actors play a significant role in formulating what identities are shared. The early modern era certainly points to a broader theory of diaspora, but it also highlights potential failures of overlapping oppression between the Jewish and African Diasporas. Despite a shared identity, the Beta Israel were submitted to academic evaluation just to validate their self-identification, not least because they were African. Further there existed an assumption that the Judaism practiced by Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews was somehow preferable or more pure. This assumption was repeatedly implicitly supported by much of the secondary literature that exists documenting the community, and it reflects a form of cultural imperialism that allows for religion to be essentialized as if European sects claim to purity should be validated over organic practice on the part of the Beta Israel.³¹ Even within marginalized communities, a diaspora in particular, African and black people are stigmatized as secondary or lesser.

The final, and ongoing, chapter of the Beta Israel is the return to Israel. The vast majority of Ethiopian Jews now live in Israel. This shift wasn't immediate at the creation of the Israeli state. Initially the participation of the Beta Israel in the Israeli project was not a primary concern both because the Israeli state did not consider the Beta Israel fully Jewish and the government of Ethiopia forbade immigration of Ethiopian Jews to Israel.³² Some of the Beta Israel still made the arduous journey, but they stayed in the country illegally and by the early seventies Ethiopian Israelis still only numbered in the double digits.³³ Eventually the Beta Israel and their allies in Israel began agitating for recognition, staging sit-ins and writing petitions. Finally, in 1973 the Chief Sephardic Rabbi declared the Beta Israel were descendant from the lost tribe of Dan based

³¹ Kaplan, "Indigenous Categories and the Study of World Religions in Ethiopia," 208-220.

³² Salamon, "Blackness in Transition," 7.

³³ Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, *Immigrants, by Period of Immigration, Country of Birth and Last Country of Residence* from the Statistical Abstract of Israel 2007-No.58.

on the above referenced Jewish accounts in the sixteenth century.³⁴ Initially the Chief Rabbi of the Ashkenazi rejected this reading, but he capitulated not long after. This ruling granted the Beta Israel the right to become Israeli citizens, and escape the devastating drought and war that was decimating their population. Initially this was a minor trickle of migration covertly funneled through Sudan. However, by the mid-1980s, the Israeli government had launched a series of airlifts that carried the vast majority of Ethiopian Jews to Israel.³⁵

This fulfillment of the Ethiopian Jewish diaspora created a lifesaving respite for the Beta Israel, but for many, if not most, the experience of diaspora and marginalization was simply recreated in Israel. In the years since the mass exodus of the Beta Israel from Ethiopia the relationship between the Beta Israel and other Jews in Israel has been fraught. Across the board, Ethiopian-Israelis have lower rates of education, wealth, and employment, even after the first generation.³⁶ Many Ethiopians have since expressed that they first experienced the construct of being Black while living in Israel.³⁷ Further the religious rites practiced by the Beta Israel have been subsumed by Ashkenazi and Sephardic practices.³⁸ After arriving in Israel, Ethiopian Jews have found that they exist in a newly created lower class whose religious leaders go unrecognized, marriages are called into question, and whose Jewish heritage is disputed.³⁹ The promise of a Jewish homeland has been significantly marred by racism. In this sense the

³⁴ Salamon, "Blackness in Transition," 7.

³⁵ Ojanuga, "The Ethiopian Jewish Experience as Blacks in Israel," 148.

³⁶ Uri Ben-Eliezer, "Multicultural Society and Everyday Cultural Racism: Second Generation of Ethiopian Jews in Israel's 'Crisis of Modernization'," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31, no. 5 (2008): 935-961.

³⁷ Steven Kaplan, "Can the Ethiopian Change His Skin? the Beta Israel (Ethiopian Jews) and Racial Discourse," *African Affairs* 98, no. 393 (1999): 535-550.

³⁸ Amith Ben-David and Adital Tirosh Ben-Ari, "The Experience of being Different: Black Jews in Israel," *Journal of Black Studies* 27, no. 4 (1997): 510-527.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

experience of the Beta Israel might not align with that of the rest of the Jewish Diaspora, but it certainly aligns with the experience of the African diaspora.

The implication of the current situation of the Beta Israel for the modern African Diaspora is difficult to parse for obvious temporal reasons. However, there are still significant lessons to learn about the mutability of marginal identities, personally held views of the self, and the limits of a singular homeland. The initial reluctance of the Israeli state to accept the Beta Israel is indicative of the danger in investing in return as the solution to diaspora. Whenever there is a return to a homeland there will follow a process that dictates who gets what land and who is allowed to return. As demonstrated by Israel, that process is likely to target and disfranchise the weakest and poorest. Similarly, even upon acceptance into the Israeli populace the Beta Israel were still marked and marginalized by their blackness. Shared identity does not necessarily transcend other barriers to equality. To even reach that point the Beta Israel had to subject themselves to external adjudication of their Judaism. This process inherently created a hierarchy of racial privilege and power. Even now the origin story of the Beta Israel has changed in order to align with the external understandings of their community, and to validate their residence in Israel. Ethiopian Jews simply desired to escape death and reclaim a religious homeland. In the process they have demonstrated how hostile a homeland can be even for a returning diaspora.

The Beta Israel are not the only community that experiences multiple diasporas. The broader black Jewish Diaspora alone also includes the former slaves of the Beta Israel, African-Americans who have immigrated semi-legally to Israel and claimed to be the original Israelites, descendants of intermarriage between gentiles of African descent and Jews of non-African descent, and the Falash Mura. The importance of these communities, lies in both validating their

ongoing experiences and in using their histories to inform modern understandings of diaspora that take into account the way in which marginal identities can make a conceptualization of home an unreachable ideal. Building this understanding of diaspora is a valuable academic project, but it has a utility that is not limited to journal papers and tenure. When crafting modern movements oriented to creating substantial change, it is important to know the limits of using diaspora as an organizing tool in fighting marginalization. In the case of the Beta Israel, diaspora was enough to transcend borders, but not enough to transcend racism.

About the author

Alexander wrote this paper as a junior at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His research interests lie in the role of identity and ideology in modern African history.

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