

Freedom Always Rings More than Once

This week two special milestones were reached. The one most well known and properly receiving most media attention—in the U.S and around the world—was the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr. delivering his historic “I Have a Dream” speech at the Lincoln Memorial. Even as far away as Israel, where the message of freedom rings loudly, it is not taken for granted, and is overlaid with a prophetic overtone, King’s message and legacy were remembered fondly.

The milestone less well known, especially outside Israel, but that is connected in my mind, was the completion of a 30-year process to bring home Jewish Ethiopians and their descendants to Israel. Some 30 years ago, Israel embarked on the rescue of a Jewish minority in Ethiopia, exiles from before the rabbinic period that held onto and preserved Judaism over the centuries, thinking that they were the only Jews left in the world.

Operation Moses in 1984 was clandestine, secretive, involved moving thousands by foot over dangerous and rough terrain in and through countries at war with Israel, and was kept quiet as long as possible.

In May 1991, Israel embarked on Operation Solomon, using 34 aircraft over a 36-hour period to shuttle more than 14,000 Ethiopian Jews from threat of danger in Ethiopia home to Israel. This marked the only time black Africans were transported out of Africa in an organized emigration from fear of persecution into freedom.

On a personal note, I remember the news vividly that week, and it helped me realize that the woman I was dating really ought to be my wife as she was the only one I could think of to

speak to and share this historic moment with.

Since 1991, there has been a continued migration of other Ethiopian Jews and the descendents of those who converted to Christianity under threat of death in the 19th century. There may be as many as 1,200 people remaining in Ethiopia who are eligible to move to Israel for family reunification, but for all intents and purposes, Ethiopian Jewish immigration to Israel is complete.

The Ethiopian exodus, while small proportionally, has been among the most challenging of immigrant groups to absorb. There are a host of reasons for this. Many unique challenges exist as life in modern Israel is vastly different from the society they left. There is much to achieve still to mark the full integration of Ethiopians into Israeli society, but out of a relatively small population there have been many success stories of Ethiopian Israelis elected to our Knesset (parliament), reaching high ranks in the IDF, and even the current Miss Israel, Yityish Aynaw, is an Ethiopian Israeli who came here as a small child. Other examples abound but challenges remain.

Just like in the U.S., a recurring theme of this week's anniversary is about measuring the success of the American Civil Rights movement 50 years later, its successes and things yet to be achieved, so, too, this milestone of the rescue and absorption of tens of thousands of Ethiopian Jews in Israel has its' achievements, but still has a way to go.

On this occasion, it is also meaningful to pause to note one of King's most famous quotes on Israel.

Ten days before his assassination, addressing the gathering of a major American Jewish rabbinic group, Dr. King said: "Peace for Israel means security, and we must stand with all our might to protect her right to exist, its territorial integrity and the right to use whatever sea lanes it needs. Israel is

one of the great outposts of democracy in the world, and a marvelous example of what can be done, how desert land can be transformed into an oasis of brotherhood and democracy. Peace for Israel means security, and that security must be a reality."

We have come a long way but there's more to do still. I'd like to believe that were he alive today, Dr. King would be proud of both milestones this week. May we continue to be challenged by and inspired to follow Dr. King's vision and courage, for the well being of both the U.S. and Israel.

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