

The Prophetic Ingathering and Final Rescue of Ethiopian Jews

I've been called many things in my life, but never black. Until recently.

I was visiting with a friend who is a black pastor in Chicago, and at one point, he burst out, "You must be half-black."

He meant it as a compliment, and I received it as such. Since then he's invited me to speak in his church as an Orthodox American-born Israeli Jew about black Jewish relations later this month, Black History Month.

I agreed immediately and enthusiastically. It's one of the most meaningful and important invitations I've ever received.

Unlike my children, who were raised in Israel, since I grew up in the U.S., my identity is unavoidably linked to the legacy of Dr. King and the civil rights movement. I'm proud of the fact that Dr. King himself recognized the unique Jewish participation in the civil rights movement. "Probably more than any other ethnic group, the Jewish community has been sympathetic and has stood as an ally to the Negro in his struggle for justice" (March 25, 1968).

Growing up, I never had many close black friends, but later, I was friendly with black people from my diverse public high school and private university. This is not to use the cliché "some of my best friends are black" which, in fairness, was not true while I was growing up but is the case now.

Though I may not have had close black friends growing up, I also never participated in or understood discrimination based on one's skin color. Part of that is the same inability to

understand or accept anti-Semitism. And from the perspective of a Jew who grew up in America, I understood the common orientation of both Jews who experienced slavery in biblical times and which remains a part of our consciousness, and African-Americans who were enslaved in much more recent times, which remains a blight on American history and is a part of their consciousness.

And I am well aware that today, in America and around the world, Jews and blacks remain discriminated against.

Though I grew up in America and spent my first 40 years there, I approach black- Jewish relations from a unique Israeli perspective. I will never forget the conversation I had with my Polish-born and very traditional grandmother about the fact that I would happily marry an Ethiopian Jewish woman. For her, the concept was simply foreign.

Sadly, in Israel, we have our share of racism as well. However, when I looked at the history of black Jewish relations from an Israeli perspective, I am inspired by Israel's dynamic relationships with black Africa. I hope it will inspire other Jews and blacks to look at this as a positive model for our shared future.

This month, Israel repatriated the first of what is anticipated to be more than 1000 Ethiopians of Jewish descent. Hopefully this is the beginning of completing the rescue of an ancient black community of Jews, and their absorption at home in Israel. (For more information about history, rescue operations and integration of Ethiopian Jews in Israel, please be in touch.)

It's no coincidence that the same week I attend a black church in Chicago, my daughter will participate in a humanitarian mission among the remainder of Ethiopia's Jewish community.

The Ethiopian Jewish community was separated from the rest of the diaspora Jews thousands of years ago. They maintained

ancient biblical traditions. Because they remained isolated, they were not privy to the thousands of years of rabbinic Judaism or even certain holidays celebrated by the vast majority of world Jewry.

The remaining 9,000 people who are awaiting their opportunity to come home to Israel are largely descendants of Ethiopian Jews who were forced to convert. But in a tribal society, they were never accepted fully as Christians and were widely discriminated against as Jews. Because they are not Jewish according to Jewish law, the time it's taken to prepare to help these remnants of an ancient Jewish community come to Israel has taken longer.

In the meantime, unlike previous waves of immigration from Ethiopia, these people have moved from their tribal lands, living in temporary communities, essentially refugee camps. The difference is that in these communities, they are taught Hebrew and rabbinic Jewish traditions as well as learning aspects of modern society so that when they arrive, they are more prepared to be absorbed into Israeli society. But Ethiopia is a poor country, and these are the poor of the poor. Profound medical and nutritional needs exist as more than 50 percent of young children are malnourished.

On a very personal level, the airlift of some 15,000 Ethiopian Jews in May 1991 had a profound impact on my life that I will speak about in Chicago. However, seeing the reunification of families of 82 descendants of Ethiopian Jews with their Israeli relatives this week has been heartwarming and inspiring. It's noteworthy that major funding for their arrival in Israel has come from the ICEJ.

Since one of the areas in which Run for Zion is committed to make an impact on and bless Israel is through support of the ingathering of the exiles, and it's hard to imagine a more remote or exiled community and that of the ancient Ethiopian Jewish community, we have undertaken to establish a special

fund to aid with the immigration and absorption of as many of the remaining thousands that we can.

It costs \$ a day, or \$45, to feed one child an extra meal for an entire month. \$9000 to feed hundreds for a whole month. It costs \$1600 to prepare and transport one new Ethiopian immigrant to begin their lives in Israel.

Please join us, individually or as part of your church or synagogue, to support these needs. We will gladly share with you details, and how your support makes a huge difference as part of God's promise to return His people from the four corners of the earth to their homeland. For information, please email jonathan@.

When it comes to black-Jewish relations, this is one way we can all make a difference together. {eo}

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