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From Strangeness to Sameness

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Race(ism) and Ethiopian Jews in Israel

Over the course of the 20th century, Ethiopian Jews have gone from living a relatively secluded, rural life in northeastern Ethiopia to becoming urban, modern Jewish citizens of Israel. The seeds of this cross-continental shift were planted via contacts between Western Jewish scholars in the 19th century and a few Beta Israel villages, as Ethiopian Jews were known in their historical setting in the Horn of Africa. Decades later, political lobbying by Jewish groups in North America on behalf of the Beta Israel prompted Israeli authorities into action, culminating in mass airlifts from the Sudan in the early 1980s. Other airlifts followed and thousands of Ethiopian Jews made their way to Israel where they received citizenship upon arrival. This was possible because in the 1970s and 1980s, the Beta Israel were recognized as "real" Jews by the highest religious authorities in Israel (the Rabbinate) in terms of bloodline as stated in key historical documents (Kaplan 1992; Grunau 1995: 17). Initially only on paper, such corroborating claims of Jewish bloodline and genealogy bound Ethiopian Jews to other Jews based on the logic of a single, common origin. Taking its cue from the Rabbinate, along with the growing pressure from diaspora Jewish groups in North America and the worsening political and economic situation in Ethiopia, the State of Israel made the Beta Israel's exit out of Africa a reality.

In Israel, the arrival of Ethiopian Jews is not spoken of in terms of migration but rather of *aliyah*. *Aliyah* literally means "to arise," and refers to the immigration or symbolic re-turn of Jews to Israel. Thus, the *aliyah* of Ethiopians was presented in spiritual, messianic and nationalist rhetoric. Long before *aliyah*, however, the Beta Israel had begun the process of transforming their cultural and religious behavior so that these fell in line with

more modern Jewish practices. This process intensified post-*aliyah*. Thirty years after their mass *aliyah*, the extent of external and internal changes they have adopted in the name of becoming modern, Jewish and Israeli still cannot not erase their most visible marker of difference: being black. This is compounded by doubts that still linger about their authenticity as Jews. Today, Ethiopian Israelis remain hyperconscious of the fact that, despite the century-long effort to produce "sameness" to other Jewish Israelis that such drastic transformations were supposed to precipitate, they are nevertheless singled out because of a visible stigma – being black – that can neither be strategically discarded nor rehabilitated (Abbink 1984). Race-based discriminatory incidents are based on three factors: 1) external stigmas: being the blackest, darkest African-looking of all Jewish groups; 2) internal "racial" make-up: doubts with regards to their religious "purity" and Jewish ancestry and, thus, their very *raison-d'être* in Israel; and 3) ethno-cultural ignorance about Ethiopia, i.e., the stereotype of the starving, uncivilized African.

Since becoming a part of Israeli society, a host of government policies have been established to not only protect Ethiopian Jews' common rights as Jews, but to also facilitate their integration by way of programs that target housing, education, employment, and youths. In this regard, Ethiopian Israelis received unprecedented aid not accorded to other racialized Jewish minorities subjected to discrimination, namely the Mizrahi (Jews of North African or Middle Eastern descent, literally called "Easterners" in Hebrew). Being the recipients of affirmative action policies on a systemic level, however, has not sheltered Ethiopian Israelis from experiencing racial discrimination and exclusion on a daily basis, be they perpetrated by individuals or a group, such as a school administration. In other words, government aid and the mobilization of resources from organizations that work in their name have not succeeded to eradicate the knowledge gap that defines the skewed perception that the Israeli public has of Ethiopian Israelis.

For Ethiopian Jews, race, but also ethnicity, religion and a low socio-economic status play important mediating factors to their social and political experiences in Israel. The stereotypes attributed to them hinge upon ethnicity (being Ethiopian), poverty (being socioeconomically disadvantaged), and chronology (being new to Israel and not yet socialized in the ways of its

society). Legally speaking, as well as in official practice and discourse, Ethiopians are an “ethnic” Jewish group on par with the Mizrahim or “Russians,” or any other Jewish group. In discursive practices, this approach eliminates the possibility of race-based interpretations of discrimination among Jews in Israel, thus upholding the taboo against speaking about themselves in racial terms. On an official level, de-racializing the relationship between Jews in Israel also cushions the sting of discrimination that exists by recoding intra-Jewish inequality and injustice in ethnic terms. What complicates the phenomenon of racism between Jews in Israel is that all Jews are, or have been, racialized subjects in the past.

Racism becomes manifest during Ethiopians’ interactions with various officials as well as the public at large. In 2009, I interviewed Ethiopian Israelis in their late 20s and early 30s who spoke mostly of encountering “innocent” racism or, as one person put it, “ignorance” about Ethiopians, which he believed was not necessarily done maliciously. Others described overt racist encounters ranging from slurs and insults to not being allowed into various spaces such as nightclubs and primary schools in one specific suburb. What the international media captures, however, are the more drastic events as opposed to the everyday subtle racism. For example, in a recent incident in which the video of a young Ethiopian Israeli soldier being beaten by two police officers captured on CCTV went viral, there were large protests condemning the outright racism and police violence. Based on the stories disseminated via the international media, it is easy to conclude that Ethiopian Israelis are victims of racism in the way that African-Americans were in the United States. This, however, is a skewed picture that does not do justice to the nuances that substantially differentiate the situation of Blacks in the United States from that of Ethiopian Jews in Israel.

Their marginalization and experiences with racism can only be studied from the perspective of their *inclusion* as Jews and all the privileges this entails. Ethiopian blackness in Israel, therefore, cannot be explored outside of their deep-seated Jewish identity. While inclusion as *de facto* Jewish citizens has justified their presence in Israel since the late 1970s and 1980s, their current experience thirty years after aliyah is better understood within the dual framework of experiences, discourses and practices of inclusion within the Jewish people on the one hand, and marginalization within the sphere of Jewish society in Israel on the other. This is

because the racial divide in Israel does not run across the black/white dichotomy, but rather the Jewish/Arab one, in terms of inclusion or exclusion from the Jewish people and the Israeli nation-state. While the American race model has left its imprint on many societies, in my research I have made an effort not to use it as a primary theoretical reference, since it is not necessarily appropriated wholesale by those who draw from it (Hall 2011). This is the case in Israel where the racial binary black/white holds currency among racialized Jews like the Mizrahim and Ethiopians. However, the fact that an intra-Jewish black/white binary operates does not alter the main line of division in Israeli society, composed of Jews and non-Jews, between those who belong to the Jewish race and those situated outside of it, epitomized by Arabs and Palestinians (Handelman 2004).

Race and blackness have become the most contested, instrumentalized and over-emphasized terrain through which young Ethiopians negotiate a deep desire to integrate their difference as Jews and Israelis while claiming sameness and inclusion. While the fixity of blackness continues to differentiate Ethiopians from the Mizrahim who partially whitened (however problematic the concept of whiteness may be in the Israeli context), it serves to situate Ethiopians in the local Israeli sphere as well as in the global arena (Anteby-Yemini 2003). For Ethiopian Israeli youngsters, grappling with their position and identity in Israel by drawing from African-American discourses of race relations allows them to partake in debates about who is a Jew on their own terms.

While the pseudo-ideology that Jews constitute a “race” has been rightfully demoted to the margins of inaccuracy and political incorrectness, a closer look at Ethiopian Israeli experiences reveals that race as an operative logic for patrolling boundaries and determining practices of inclusion and exclusion remains at work in Israel. In fact, the discrimination they face can be better understood from the perspective of their inclusion – however doubted by some – as being racially (in terms of bloodline) Jewish, which substantially differentiates them from the type of racism experienced by Palestinians living in Israel or illegal migrant workers. Recognizing that Ethiopian Israelis participate in the Israeli polity in ways that these groups cannot, however, does not diminish the importance of understanding how they deal with daily encounters of racism, discrimination, and, in rare cases, violence.

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