



# **Beta Israel**

## **A House Divided**

**University Art Museum**

**State University of New York at Binghamton**

# **Beta Israel**

## **A House Divided**

**David I. Becker**  
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**University Art Museum**  
**State University of New York at Binghamton**  
**January 19-February 26, 1989**

## Acknowledgements

It was during my high school years in New York City that I first heard of the "Falashas," the black Jews of Ethiopia. As a young person beginning to struggle with my own identity as a Jew, I was captivated by the notion of a small group of Jews who had managed to survive through centuries of persecution and isolation in Ethiopia.

In the aftermath of "Operation Moses," the airlift that carried 7,000 Ethiopian Jews to Israel, I served for eleven months as a volunteer among the new immigrants. Although I found them adapting well to their new environments, the pain of separation from family members left behind in Ethiopia was, for some, too much to bear. This exhibition, which I dedicate to all those still waiting to be reunited, is based on research carried out in Israel, 1986-87, Ethiopia, summer 1988, and at the State University of New York at Binghamton, Binghamton, 1987-89.

This exhibition, prepared through the curatorial practice course (of the graduate program in the History and Theory of Art and Architecture), was supervised by Lynn Gamwell, director of the University Art Museum, and Yedida K. Stillman, director of the Judaic Studies Program. I thank Lynn Gamwell for sharing with me so much of her expertise in the museum world. The dedication of Yedida Stillman to this project and my years of study with her in the areas of ethnography and folklore were invaluable to me. I also wish to thank my mentor, Norman A. Stillman, professor of history and Arabic.

The advice and commitment of Barbara Ribakove-Gordon,

director of the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, and William Recant, director of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, greatly enhanced the project. Thanks also to H. Edward Weberman for lending me many of his artifacts from Ethiopia, and to Marriam Cramer Ring for the photograph for the exhibit poster.

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The undying commitment of my wife Sandra, who has made this cause her cause, has been a never-ending source of inspiration to me, especially through the most trying times.

David I. Becker

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Cover: Beta Israel child with basket made in Israel by her mother.  
Kiryat Yam, Israel, 1987.

Opposite: A cluster of *tukuls* (typical homes of northern Ethiopia).  
Gojam Province, Ethiopia, 1988.



## Introduction

Nearly four years have passed since 7,000 Ethiopian Jews were flown from makeshift airports in the Sudanese hinterland to the tarmac of Ben-Gurion airport in Israel. "Operation Moses," the monumental scheme to airlift out the entire Ethiopian Jewish community, was interrupted in midstream leaving an estimated 15,000 behind.

The transfer of people from a country with a simple technology to an industrialized economy is not easy. Nor is the process of integrating immigrants socially and culturally into a new society. Yet, in the past four years, Ethiopian Jews have made remarkable strides in their new homeland.

All Ethiopian children have been provided with formal education and today speak fluent Hebrew. The vast majority of Ethiopian youth in Israel (an estimated 10% of whom are orphans) are pupils at residential Youth Aliyah institutions. More than 100 Ethiopian students study at Israel's prestigious universities, and a much larger number learn in technological frameworks. The problems are, of course, numerous, such as the increasing generation gap between children and their parents, but successes are great.

In the health field, all the Ethiopian immigrants have been effectively treated and intestinal diseases eradicated.

Ethiopian immigrants are today leaving the absorption centers set up by the Jewish Agency to aid immigrants in the early stages of settlement and moving to permanent housing all over the country. Large concentrations of Ethiopian immigrants can be found in towns such as Afula, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Lod, Ramle, Beersheba, Arad, and Nazareth, where they work in local occupations.

The Beta Israel (literally, House of Israel), as they were known in Ethiopia, were cut off from the mainstream of

Judaism for hundreds of years. They did not possess the Oral Law (the rabbinic tradition which complements the biblical Written Law), and their religious practices and beliefs sometimes had a different emphasis. For example, they strictly observed the laws of purity such that menstruating women were secluded in a special hut. In Israel they celebrate all the major holidays, including the ancient Ethiopian Jewish festival of the *Sigd*, a holiday commemorating the return of Jews to the Land of Israel from the Babylonian exile.

In 1973 the Chief Rabbinate of Israel recognized the Jews of Ethiopia as "full Jews," although they still demanded symbolic conversion before marriage. In December 1988, Rabbi Chelouche, a member of the Chief Rabbinate's Council, was appointed the official marriage registrar for Ethiopian Jews and can marry them without symbolic conversion.

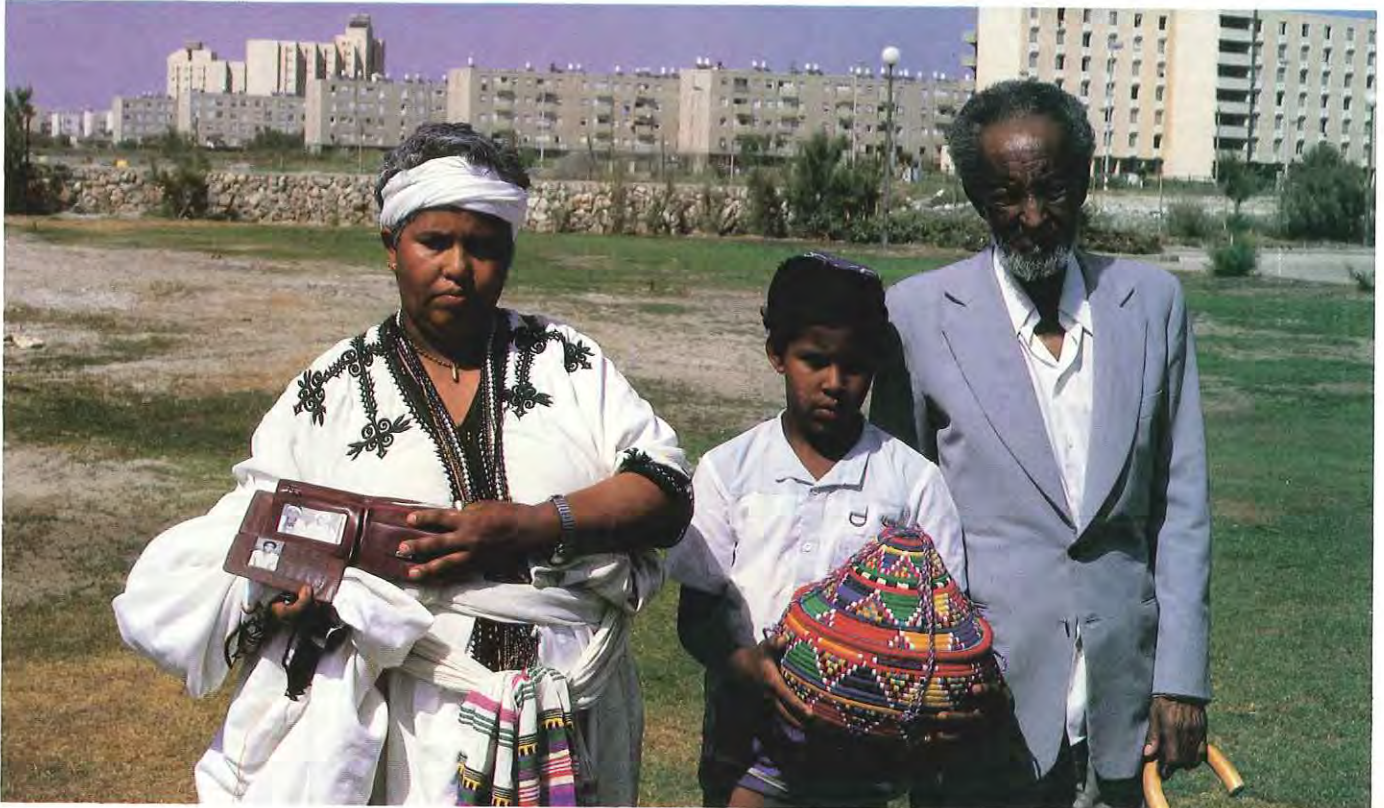
The challenge for the future is to ensure a continuity of tradition between Ethiopia and Israel both in daily life and in religious and cultural heritage. "Beta Israel: A House Divided" highlights this challenge by demonstrating traditional arts and way of life in Ethiopia and documenting the changes incurred in modern Israeli society. The exhibition, besides its intrinsic interest and original beauty, is of poignant significance as half of the Ethiopian Jewish community in Ethiopia is still waiting to return to Jerusalem.

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# Continuity and Change, Adoption and Adaptation: Beta Israel Culture at a Crossroads

by David I. Becker



Immigrants display wallet photographs of family members left behind in Ethiopia. Kiryat Yam, Israel, 1987.

**Ethiopia.** The very name of this nation has come to be synonymous with misery in the "Dark Continent" of Africa. Ethiopia is one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world. Its 48 million inhabitants are plagued by famine, disease, and civil war. An infant born in Ethiopia has a 50% chance of surviving its first year, and adults have a life expectancy of 39 years. The rate of illiteracy is high and the income of most is less than \$120 (U.S.) a year. Ruled by a traditional monarchy until 1974, Ethiopia today is governed by a Marxist military regime.

In light of all this suffering, the greatness of ancient Ethiopia has been forgotten. Biblical narrative speaks of Ethiopia as a center of trade and commerce, and the ancient city of Axum in northern Ethiopia testifies to the flourishing of Christianity in the land as early as the 4th century C.E. Known as Abyssinia in the Middle Ages and Kush in biblical times, Ethiopia today reflects a past shaped by scores of cultures which traversed, and sometimes settled within, its borders.

Situated in northeast Africa, Ethiopia lies at a physical and cultural crossroads between black Africa, Muslim North Africa, and the Middle East. Although Amharic, a language

derived from the ancient Semitic tongue Ge'ez, is today the official language of Ethiopia, more than 70 languages and hundreds of dialects are spoken in Ethiopia among the more than 100 racial and ethnic groups that comprise its population. Approximately 40% of the Ethiopian population is Christian; another 45% is Muslim. The remainder of the populace is composed of animists and religious minorities. It is within this last group that the Jews of Ethiopia, constituting less than 1% of the nation's population, is counted.

Scattered throughout hundreds of villages tucked away in the mountains of northern Ethiopia remain 15,000 to 20,000 of Ethiopia's black Jews. Forbidden by Christian rulers to own land since the Middle Ages, they have been taunted by their neighbors with the label "Falasha," a derogatory term connoting a landless or wandering people. Survivors of centuries of religious and economic persecution, they proudly refer to themselves as "Beta Israel," an Hebraic term which means House of Israel.

Where did this black Jewish population originate, and how did it fall victim to such deplorable conditions? To understand this we must examine the history of the community.

## History

Although rabbinic writings from the 15th century on refer to Jews in the land that is today Ethiopia, the origins of the community remain shrouded in mystery.<sup>1</sup> Biblical references suggest the arrival of Israelite tribes in the Land of Kush toward the end of the period of the First Temple in Jerusalem. Isaiah 11:11 states:

And it shall come to pass that in that day the Lord will set His hand again the second time to recover the remnant of His people, that shall be left, from Assyria, and from Egypt, and from Pathros, and from Kush, and from Elam, and from Shinar, and from Hamat, and from the Islands of the Sea.

Similarly, according to Zephania 3:10:

From beyond the rivers of Kush come my suppliants, the daughters of Puzsai, who bring my offering.

In accordance with these biblical references, some scholars believe that the early Jewish settlers in Kush were members of the Israelite tribe of Dan, who migrated to Kush. Other theories suggest that the Beta Israel are descendants of Yemenite and/or Egyptian Jews who settled in Kush and intermarried with the local population, perhaps as late as the 6th century C.E. Others believe that the Beta Israel are descendants of Ethiopian Christians and pagans, who were influenced by Jewish merchants and travelers who passed through Abyssinia in the Middle Ages and Judaized elements of the local population.

The Ethiopian Christians, too, trace their lineage back to the Land of Israel in the time of King Solomon. The biblical account of the visit of the Queen of Sheba<sup>2</sup> to the court of King Solomon (I Kings 10:1-10, 13; II Chron. 9:1-9, 12) provides an historical backdrop against which many Ethiopian Christian folk tales are set. According to Ethiopian Christians, Makeda, the Queen of Sheba, found favor in the eyes of King Solomon and bore him a son, Menelik. Having spent part of his youth in the court of Solomon, Menelik is said to have returned to his mother's kingdom bringing back Judaic customs and law from the court of his father. Some tales claim that Menelik also brought the holy ark containing the Torah, from Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, to Kush, thus transferring the chosenness of the House of Israel to the people of Kush.<sup>3</sup> Ethiopian Christians today still assert their claim to be of the lineage of King Solomon and the last imperial ruler of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie, assumed the title "Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah."

Although rabbinic writings and travel diaries reflect knowledge of a Jewish community in Ethiopia throughout the Middle Ages, the 18th century writings of the Scottish explorer of Ethiopia, James Bruce, are a particularly rich source of information. Bruce arrived in Ethiopia in 1769 and spent two years there on his search for the headwaters of the Blue Nile. The publication in 1790 of his travel log, entitled *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* in which Bruce mentions his encounters with the Beta Israel, sparked great interest among Christian missionaries. Although the actual effect of the missionaries remains undetermined, groups such as the London Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews vigorously pursued an active program designed to convert the Beta Israel.<sup>4</sup>

In response to the missionary activities among the Beta Israel, world Jewish concern began to grow. In 1867, the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, a Paris-based Jewish philanthropic organization committed to aiding Jewish commu-

nities in distress, sent Joseph Halévy, an Orientalist at the Sorbonne, to assess the situation of the Beta Israel. Moved by the lack of education, poverty, and increased conversion of the Beta Israel to Christianity, Halévy called on the *Alliance* to establish Jewish schools in Ethiopia, but his pleas were not heeded.

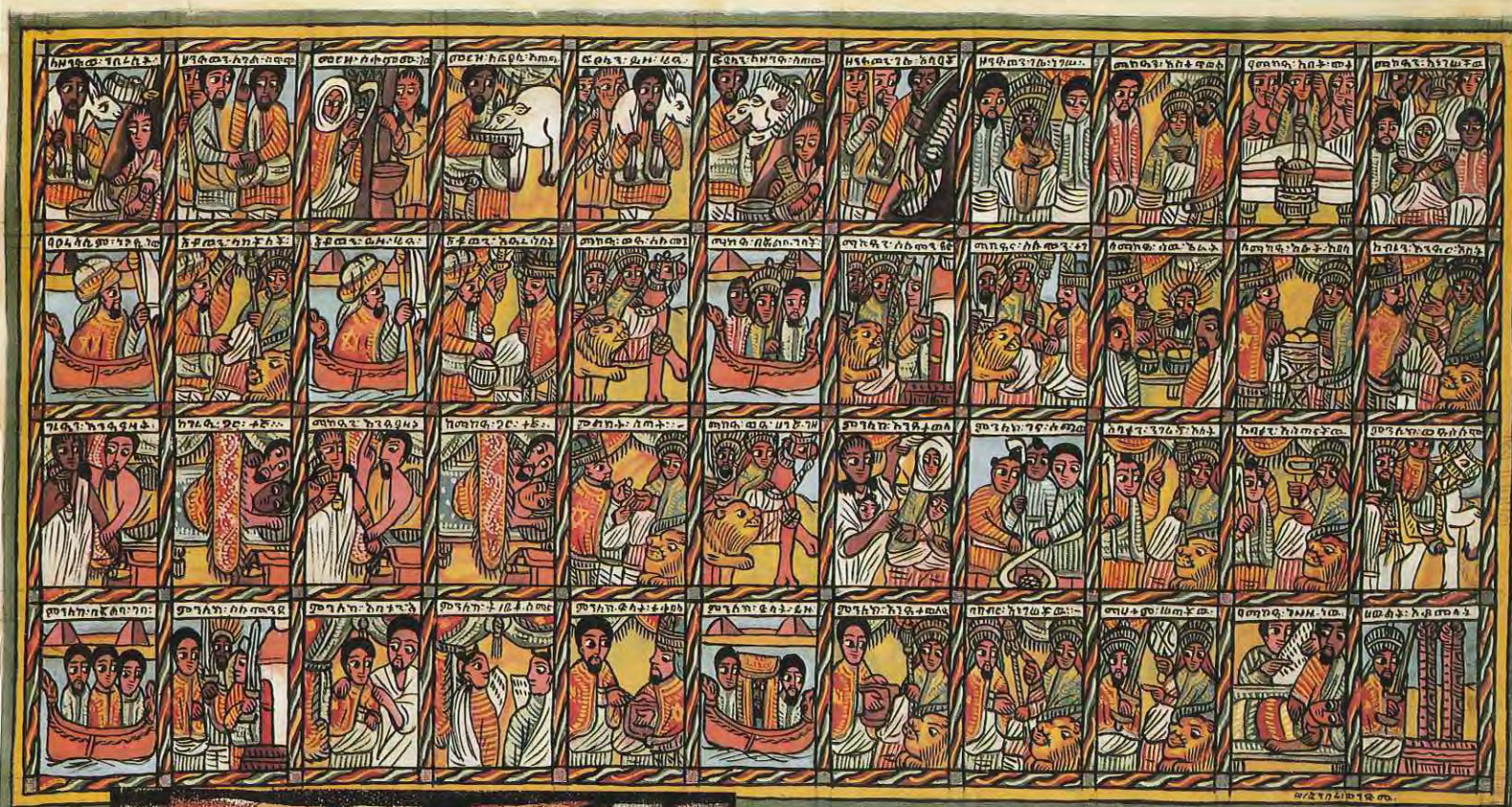
The latter part of the 19th century marked a turning point in the physical condition of the Beta Israel population. In addition to missionaries converting the Beta Israel, the community, estimated to have numbered 250,000 in the 1850s, was reduced by half between 1885 and 1895 due to famine, disease, and invasion in northwest Ethiopia. Although conditions continued to worsen, help did not reach the Beta Israel until the 20th century.

It was in 1904 that Jacques Faitlovitch, a Jew of Polish descent who studied Oriental languages under Halévy, reached Ethiopia. In the early part of the century, Faitlovitch established a number of pro-Falasha committees in Europe and America, through which he sought to bring the plight of the Beta Israel to the attention of world Jewry and to raise funds in their behalf. Although his success in these areas was marginal, he did establish a Jewish school in Ethiopia's capital city, Addis Ababa, and brought more than 20 Beta Israel students to study in *yeshivot* (traditional Jewish religious schools) in France, Germany, Italy, and Palestine. Many of these students returned to Ethiopia as educators and taught their people aspects of rabbinic Judaism that often differed from traditional Beta Israel religious practice. It was through men like Halévy and Faitlovitch and their pupils that links between Ethiopian Jewry and the rest of world Jewry were forged, and through them that talmudic law and western Judaism began to influence Beta Israel life. This link marks the beginning of a process of change in the material culture, religious life, language, and customs of the Beta Israel.

The 20th century indeed marked many changes for Ethiopian Jewry. In addition to increased contact with Jews from other lands, the establishment of the State of Israel breathed new hope into the ancient community, which prayed daily for the fulfillment of the biblical promise of redemption and return to the holy city of Jerusalem. Ethiopian law, however, forbade the emigration of the Jews to Israel. Increased awareness about the Jews of Ethiopia coupled with worsening famine, civil war, and increased Christian hostility toward the Jewish minority prompted the government of Israel to undertake an unpublicized small scale rescue operation, which succeeded in bringing several thousand Ethiopian Jews to Israel over a period of years. The climax of this operation was the daring rescue mission code named Operation Moses, reminiscent of the biblical exodus of the Israelites, led by Moses, out of Egypt toward the Promised Land of Israel.

## Operation Moses

The story of Operation Moses, the mission through which more than 7,000 Beta Israel refugees were secretly airlifted out of Sudanese refugee camps (from November 1984 to January 1985) under the direction of the Mossad, Israel's secret service, is a dramatic chapter in the history of human rights, the Jewish people, and the State of Israel. Today, four years after indiscreet media coverage unmasked the secret airlift, forcing the Mossad to abort the mission, 16,000 Ethio-



Above: Painting by Jannbaru Wandemmu depicts popular Ethiopian legend of King Solomon and Makeda, the Queen of Sheba. Left: Detail shows Jerusalem merchant leaving Ethiopia with Makeda's gifts of perfume for King Solomon. Acrylic on canvas, 55-1/2" x 30", Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.







*Above:* A religious leader displays a Hebrew Torah scroll given to his community by Jewish travelers from the west. Wolleka, Ethiopia, 1988.

*Opposite:* Child in doorway of village home in Wolleka.



pian Jews are building new lives in Israel. But, for every Ethiopian Jew who has reached the Promised Land, at least one—sometimes a mother, sometimes a brother or child—remains behind, trapped in war-torn, famine-stricken Ethiopia.

The emigration of half of the Ethiopian Jewish community to Israel has profoundly affected the cultural life and organization of Ethiopian Jews in both Israel and Ethiopia. The nuclear family, the fundamental unit in the social structure of Ethiopian life in general, has been greatly disrupted by the large scale movement to Israel. Likewise, the emigration of approximately half of the religious leaders of the community has left the religious life of the Beta Israel in Ethiopia in a state of decay.

Those who have made it to Israel face many changes as well. The shift from rural life in Ethiopia to urban settlement in Israel, from an agricultural-artisan economy to a highly technological society, and from a persecuted religious minority to an ethnic component of a Jewish majority in Israel,<sup>5</sup> all contribute to shaping the ways Ethiopian Jews relate to their traditional culture and to the new culture they encounter in Israel.

This essay focuses primarily on changes in the material culture of the Beta Israel which, although begun in the 19th century, were greatly accelerated by emigration through Operation Moses.

## Material Culture

Although the processes of cultural change were already in motion as far back as a century ago, the dramatic emigration of the Beta Israel to Israel in recent years has substan-

tially propelled the dynamics of change within both halves of the community. The study of material culture, that is, culture as it is expressed in objects, is a vital tool in the interpretation of culture in general. The Orientalist S.D. Goitein notes that "... the relationship between man and object is apt to reveal much about man himself."<sup>6</sup> Continuity and change in the art, language, food, dress, crafts, occupations, and communal, social, and economic structure of a community reflect continuity and change in the "psyche and attitudes,"<sup>7</sup> the self-impression and definition of members of the group.

In less literary cultures in particular, material objects may often best illustrate the nature of society. The relative paucity of written literature among the Beta Israel highlights the importance, for scholars, of the objects of daily life through which culture is reflected. Increased contact with western Jews in recent decades has enabled the Beta Israel of Ethiopia to embrace and adopt concepts and cultural norms from the west in their village and family lives. This may be seen, for example, in the adoption of western Jewish symbols such as the six-pointed Star of David and the menorah (ritual candelabra);<sup>8</sup> the replacement of traditional Ge'ez names for Beta Israel holidays and rituals with analogous Hebrew terms;<sup>9</sup> and a general de-emphasis on religious customs that set the Beta Israel apart from mainstream Jewry (e.g., ritual sacrifice, which has long been abandoned by the rest of world Jewry).

Similarly, although the pressures of the immigrant experience to assimilate may be great, the Beta Israel who have reached Israel abandon aspects of their culture for practical and sometimes political reasons, while retaining and adapting other aspects of their culture to suit their life in Israel. For example, the different economic structure of



Above: Blacksmiths at work along the periphery of the Gondar Market, Gondar, Ethiopia, 1988.  
 Opposite, top to bottom: Jewelry fashioned from scrap metal: floral motif earrings with machine-screw mounts, 1/2" diam.; Star of David pendant with incised design, 1-1/2" h.; Wolleka, Ethiopia. Knives and leather sheaths from left, horn handle with incised design on grip, 9-3/4" l., wood handle, 11-3/4" l., horn handle, 12-1/4" l. Wood-handled adze, 15" l., adze head, 5-1/4" x 2-1/2", horse bit, 9-1/2" l., awls, 4-1/2" and 5-1/2" l. Knives and tools by Beta Israel blacksmiths, Gondar region, Ethiopia.

Israeli society has forced many of the Beta Israel to set aside their artisan and agrarian skills and be retrained for the Israeli work force. Or, for example, although teff, an Ethiopian grain which is the main ingredient in the staple Ethiopian pancake-like bread, *injera*, does not exist in Israel, the food still persists in a modified form, made from white or whole wheat flour. *Injera* in Ethiopia is approximately twenty inches to two feet in diameter and is produced over a coal fire; the considerably smaller Israeli version is produced in a frying pan on top of a gas stove.

If, in fact, continuity and change in material objects and lifestyle do reflect elements of continuity and change in the psyche and attitudes of a group, what are the implications of such changes for both halves of the Beta Israel community today?

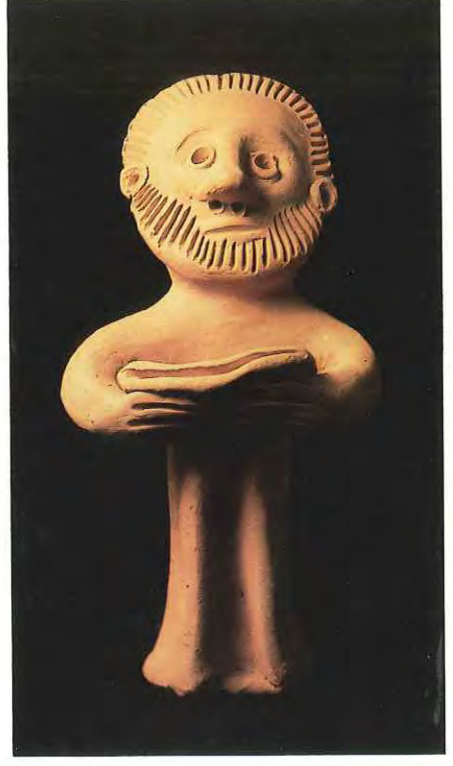
## Crafts and Occupations

Although it is not entirely clear when the Beta Israel began to enter the artisan class, edicts issued between the 15th and 17th centuries by the conquering Christian kings of northern Ethiopia, forbidding the Beta Israel to own land, forced many of them to eke out a living as craftsmen.<sup>10</sup> According to Beta Israel tradition, it was during this period that Beta Israel masons built the palaces of the Christian rulers of Gondar. While the artisan class of Ethiopia, as in many traditional societies, has historically been looked down upon, certain crafts such as blacksmithing and pottery were believed by the populace to be linked to evil spirits.<sup>11</sup> Beta Israel men who serve as blacksmiths are accused by their Christian neighbors of possessing the ability to harness supernatural powers to produce stronger knives and ploughshares, increasing the demand for Beta Israel metalwork among the Christians. At the same time, the Beta Israel blacksmiths are considered *buda*, possessed of the evil eye and able to turn into hyenas at night and devour victims of their choice. Although their neighbors depend on them for their skills as craftsmen, the Beta Israel blacksmiths are despised. Similarly, the Beta Israel women are said to possess powers that enable them to produce pottery that is stronger and superior to vessels produced by other ethnic groups.<sup>12</sup>

With the exception of several jewelers, Beta Israel metalworkers no longer practice their craft in Israel. The traditional Beta Israel blacksmith who forged tools, knives, ploughshares, and horse bits on an anvil alongside his village home has no place in the technologically advanced Israeli society. Machine-made implements of high quality and low cost render the skills of the Ethiopian blacksmith obsolete in Israel.

A most interesting example of continuity, change, and adaptation may be seen in the production of Beta Israel pottery in Ethiopia and Israel today. Beta Israel women have traditionally produced clay storage jugs and cooking vessels for their own households and often supplement the family income by selling earthenware to non-Jewish neighbors. Various types of clay and ground-up pottery shards are kneaded together by the women to produce a low-grade clay which is then shaped into vessels by hand, using a coiling method. After drying in the sun for several days, the pots are burnished and fired in a hole in the ground alongside the home. In this process of pit-firing, vessels are stacked in the hole with wood and dung placed between them. The wood and dung are burned to generate heat. The fuels produce a great deal of smoke, which is fired into the pottery, giving it a black lustre.





Although perhaps the only exception to traditional pottery production in Ethiopia, development and change in pottery-making in the village of Wolleka illustrates the impact that westernization may have on traditional crafts. The village of Wolleka, today inhabited by about 500 residents (predominantly Jewish although some residents have converted to Christianity) is situated in the Gondar Province, approximately six kilometers north of the provincial capital, Gondar City. In the 1950s, the importance of Wolleka grew as western tourists in Ethiopia became increasingly curious about the black Jews. Wolleka began to emerge as a tourist showcase, an example of "a typical Falasha village." In the 1960s, the women of the village began to produce small pit-fired clay figurines depicting the Lion of Judah, Solomon and Sheba, and Ethiopian village life, for sale to tourists.<sup>13</sup> Due to the low temperatures at which they are fired, the figurines are exceptionally fragile. In an attempt to upgrade the pottery and increase production, a kiln and glazes were introduced in the village in the 1960s. Today, the kiln is operated when gas fuel cylinders are available—otherwise, the women resort to pit-firing.

Although the Beta Israel women in Israel no longer produce ceramic cooking vessels or water jugs, a modified form of pottery-making is continued by several women in Safed, a city northeast of Haifa, noted for its artist colony and crafts people. In an attempt to ensure the continuation of Ethiopian handicrafts and employ some artisans, the Ethiopian Handicraft Corporation sells crafts made by the Beta Israel in its workshops. Beta Israel women use red or beige clay to produce forms similar to those of the Wolleka figurines. A workshop is located in the old section of Safed, an urban area in which the pit-firing process is not considered practical. The works are fired in kilns, resulting in stronger, heavier pieces of reddish and beige color. While the shape and subjects of the figures and their continued production for the tourist market remain much the same, the materials, method, and means of production have changed.

Throughout Ethiopia, numerous types of baskets are produced from a variety of plants and natural fibers for domestic use. Baskets may be used for food and grain storage, jewelry boxes, serving trays, and for sifting and straining. The basket *par excellence* is the *mesob*, a large round, woven tray attached to a pedestal and fitted with a conical lid. Family members sit on the floor around the *mesob*, which serves as a table from which *injera* is eaten. Like pottery, baskets are traditionally produced by the women of the household. The baskets of the Beta Israel women in Ethiopia greatly resemble those found among their neighbors. Reeds and grasses are twisted into coils which are bound together by transverse fibers. These fibers are often dyed various colors and may be woven into the coils to create geometric patterns.<sup>14</sup> Baskets are often adorned with colored strips of leather around the edges and at the center of basket lids. Leather straps may be attached to the sides of the basket to secure the lid.

In Israel, Beta Israel women have adapted their traditional form of basket weaving to suit their new environment and lifestyles. Although grass and reeds are still used to form the insides of the coils, brightly colored synthetic yarns are used to weave the coils together and create the geometric designs. While baskets containing yarn are occasionally found in Ethiopia, they are the norm among the Beta Israel women in Israel, reflecting the availability of the yarns, and, perhaps, the desire of the women to modify their handicrafts in the interest of saving time—a valuable commodity in an indus-



Above: Pit-fired ceramic figurine of King Solomon and Queen of Sheba in bed, 5" x 2-3/4" x 3", Wolleka, Ethiopia.

Opposite, top: Ceramic figurines. (From left) Beta Israel religious leader, pit-fired, 7-1/2" h., Wolleka, Ethiopia. Man holding an animal, kiln-fired glazed, 6-1/2" h., Wolleka, Ethiopia. Man holding *injera*, kiln-fired unglazed, 8" h., Safed, Israel. Opposite, bottom: Lidded baskets of natural and dyed plant fibers with leather trim, Wolleka, Ethiopia. (From left) Storage basket, 11-1/2" diam.; storage basket, 9-1/2" diam.; jewelry basket, 9-1/2" x 5-1/4" x 3-1/4".



Above: Left, basket and lid of plant fibers and synthetic yarn, 10-1/4" diam., Israel; right, basket with lid of natural and dyed plant fibers with leather trim, 9-3/4" diam., Wolleka, Ethiopia. *Inset photos:* Ethiopian child with basket made in Israel by her mother. Kiryat Yam, Israel, 1987. Beta Israel woman weaves a basket of plant fibers and yarn in an absorption center for new immigrants. Gilo, Jerusalem, Israel, 1985. *Below:* A woman spins cotton into thread. Wolleka, Ethiopia, 1984.



trialized society such as Israel. Beta Israel women now spend more time away from home, often at a job or a vocational training program. The function of the baskets they produce in Israel has radically changed—the traditional *mesobs* have been replaced by western style tables, and grain and food storage baskets have been superseded by Pyrex jars and sleek plastic stacking containers. The baskets produced in Israel are made purely for decorative purposes, and the women today take pride in their work more as an artistic craft than as a practical one. The baskets are hung on the walls of Israeli apartments, often next to small baskets the Ethiopian immigrants carried to Israel.

As for textile production, there are several Beta Israel weavers practicing a modified form of their craft in Israel. The fabrics produced by Beta Israel weavers in Ethiopia greatly resemble the textiles of other ethnic groups in the north of Ethiopia. In fact, it is not uncommon today for Beta Israel weavers to market their goods outside of their community. As with other crafts, the weaving processes are gender-specific among the Beta Israel. Women clean and spin the cotton into thread, while men work the looms.

The national dress of Ethiopia, the *shamma*, is a white cloth usually bordered on two sides with bands of bright color. The *shamma* is worn like a toga and sometimes like a shawl, draped around the shoulders and over the head. During the wet and colder months, a heavier cloth called a *gabi* is worn. While both men and women wear the *shamma* and *gabi*, the *qamis*, a rectangular shaped sleeveless dress, and the *suri*, a type of trouser, are worn by women and men respectively under the outer garments. A colorful belt, ten to twelve feet in length, called a *mekinet*, is wrapped around the *qamis* at the waist and tied. Cloth for all these garments is produced by the village weaver.

The loom, made of hewn wood and poles, is usually found outside of the weaver's home. The weaver sits on the ground with his legs in a hollow over which the loom stands. As he throws wool- or cotton-filled spindles back and forth across the weft, the weaver operates the loom through a system of strings or leather thongs tied to his feet. Although machine-made garments often consisting of synthetic fibers and dyes are found in some large marketplaces, the village weavers usually use natural materials.

In Israel, on the other hand, the Beta Israel textiles are almost entirely synthetic. Store-bought synthetic yarns are easier to obtain in Israel, and natural cotton and wool are not as readily available to the weavers as they were in the Ethiopian highlands. Several looms of modified design have been constructed with milled lumber by Beta Israel weavers in a workshop of the Ethiopian Handicraft Corporation in Safed, and several other looms have been built by individual weavers.

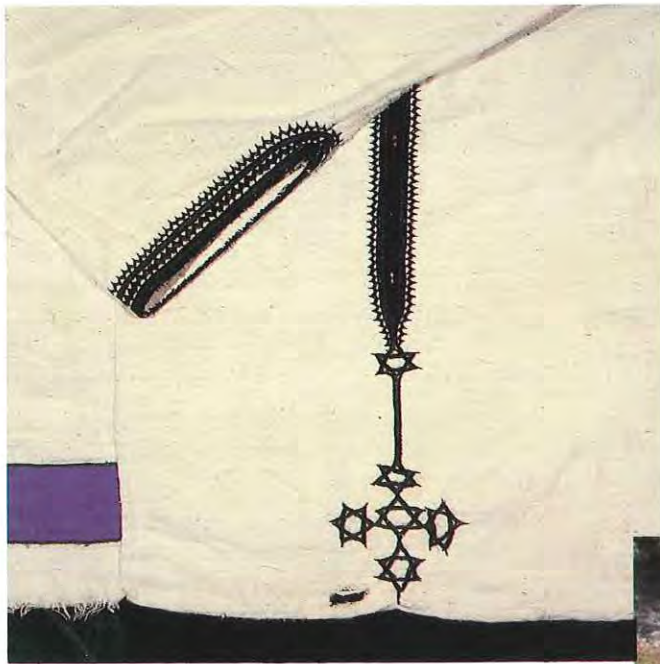
Beta Israel weavers traditionally produce the fabric used by the women to make their *qamis*. In Israel, time constraints and relatively high prices of Beta Israel hand-woven cloth have led the women to use machine-woven, cheaper textiles to produce these garments. The *qamis* in both Ethiopia and Israel is richly embroidered down the center in the front and around the arm and neck openings. Although the embroidery patterns are usually geometric, the Christian women often embroider local crucifix motifs on their garments. In recent years, Beta Israel women have embroidered Jewish symbols on their dresses;<sup>15</sup> a practice still carried on in Israel today.

In Ethiopia, the Beta Israel women embroidered with colorful synthetically dyed threads to some extent. In Israel, they use the readily available synthetic colors exclusively. The



A Beta Israel weaver at work at his home. Wolleka, Ethiopia, 1988.





*Clockwise from top left:* Hand-loomed mekinet of natural and dyed home-spun cotton, 113" x 20-1/2", Gondar region, Ethiopia. Hand-loomed shawl of machine-spun cotton and synthetic yarns, 60" x 30-3/4", Jerusalem, Israel. Skullcap embroidered in Ethiopian fashion, 5-1/2" diam., Israel. Qamis with Star of David embroidery at hem, Gondar region. *Inset photo:* Beta Israel immigrant embroidering a new dress. Kiryat Yam, Israel, 1987.



women have also adapted their embroidery, traditionally used to decorate women's clothing, to an income-producing craft in Israel. They now embroider Ethiopian geometric designs and Jewish symbols on skullcaps (*kippot* in Hebrew). These are small and less labor-intensive to produce than dresses, relatively inexpensive as souvenirs, conform with tourist ideas of Jewish symbolism, and are thus easier to market. The *kippot* are not customarily a part of the Beta Israel wardrobe. The production of non-Ethiopian male garments decorated with Beta Israel embroidery illustrates the Beta Israel's ability to adapt to a new society and turn handicrafts formerly made for home consumption into a money-making enterprise. Life in Israel has given the Ethiopians a different view of their culture.

In Israel today, it is not uncommon to find older Beta Israel women wearing traditional-style garments of various origins—a *qamis* made in Israel of machine-made fabric may be worn with a *mekinet* brought from Ethiopia and covered with a *shamma* or *gabi* hand-woven in Israel. Beta Israel men often wear a mix of western style garments—trousers, shoes, hats, overcoats—and *shammas* (this hodgepodge of clothing can be found among men in Ethiopia as well). The young members of the community in Israel wear western style clothing, although traditional garb may be worn on special occasions—a bride and groom, for instance, may wear traditional clothing for their wedding ceremony.

Along with other aspects of culture, Ethiopian music continues to exist to some extent in Israel. While the traditional Ethiopian instruments are scarce in Israel, there are several semi-professional Ethiopian song-and-dance troupes who perform occasionally. Traditional music is sung on special occasions such as a wedding. Ethiopian music is incorporated in a daily radio news program in Amharic for Beta Israel immigrants.

The cuisine of the Beta Israel resembles that of other ethnic groups of northern Ethiopia, except when religious law mandates certain differences. The consumption of raw meat, although considered a delicacy by Ethiopian Christians, is abhorrent in the eyes of the Beta Israel. Meat is soaked to draw out the blood before preparation in accordance with Jewish religious tradition. Ethiopian Christians, Muslims, and the Beta Israel each have their own form of ritual slaughter, and, in general, members of one group abstain from consuming foods prepared by members of other groups.<sup>16</sup> In addition to the modified form of *injera*, the Beta Israel immigrants continue to produce other ethnic foods in Israel. *Wot*, a spicy beef, chicken, or vegetable stew eaten with *injera*, persists as the basic dish of Ethiopians in Israel. *Dabbo*, a special raised bread baked for the Sabbath, is made by the Beta Israel in Israeli household kitchens with the aid of such conveniences as gas ovens and nonstick cake pans. The traditional drink, *talla*, made from hops and grain, has given way to bottled Israeli beer.

In addition to changes in the preparation of foods, the Beta Israel diet has undergone revisions in Israel. Most obvious is the infusion of Israeli foods into the diet of younger Ethiopians. While they may eat *injera* and *wot* at home, many Beta Israel children take sandwiches of margarine and chocolate spread to school. Some serious nutrition problems have resulted from these dietary changes. In Ethiopia, *injera* is made of teff, a grain high in iron content. As teff is unavailable in Israel, Beta Israel women use white flour as a substitute. The consumption of white flour, containing much less iron than teff, has led to an increase in anemia among Beta Israel immigrants. Attempts to grow teff in Israel have



A *mesanko*, Ethiopian single-string instrument and bow.

failed due to differences in climate and soil, and the Ministry of Health in Israel now advises Ethiopian immigrants to use whole wheat flour in place of white flour, and to supplement their diet with additional nutrients.

Objects of everyday life embody the history of those who make them and use them. Although western Jewish practice and ideas were already influencing the Beta Israel at the beginning of this century, changes in the daily life and material culture of Ethiopian Jews in Israel reflect changes brought about by their emigration from rural Ethiopia to urban centers in Israel. The Beta Israel moved swiftly from an agricultural-artisan economy to a highly technological society. Their social status changed from a persecuted religious minority to an ethnic component of a Jewish majority. Their experiences in adjusting to their new society necessitated changes in the materials used to produce objects and in the value and function of these objects. Some objects have been duplicated, some adapted or modified to suit life in their new environment, and some new ones have been adopted.

Ethiopian Jews in Israel no longer use woven baskets as functional storage space; the baskets they produce in Israel are purely decorative. Ceramic water jugs are no longer necessary in Israel, and figurines sold to tourists are formed from high grade clay and fired in kilns. Embroidery is applied to western style clothing, creating a market among tourists in Israel. These activities are evidence of the changes in the psyche and attitudes of the makers of the objects. They not only illustrate the desire of the Beta Israel to adapt to their new economic environment, but are also a reflection of their desire to preserve their culture and to incorporate aspects of it in Israeli society.

Although change is inevitable in all immigrant societies, the challenge faced by the Beta Israel community is to retain cultural elements compatible with life in Israel while availing themselves of the new opportunities before them. The greatest challenge, however, faced by Ethiopian Jews, the government of Israel, and world Jewry as a whole is the completion of Operation Moses, and the reunification of the House of Israel.



## Notes

1. For excerpts of the writings of some of the major rabbinic authorities from the 15th to 17th centuries referring to the Jews of Ethiopia, see Menachem Waldman, *The Jews of Ethiopia: The Beta Israel Community* (Jerusalem: Ami-Shav, 1984), pp. 81-85.
2. The ancient Kingdom of Sheba was situated in the part of the Arabian peninsula that is today called Yemen and extended into parts of modern Ethiopia.
3. See Michèle Schoenberger, "The Falashas of Ethiopia: An Ethnographic Study" (Dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1975), p. 11.
4. For an outline of the activities in Ethiopia of the London Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews, see Martin J. Flad, *A Short Description of the Falasha and Kemants in Abyssinia* (Basle: The Mission Press on Chrishona, 1866). See also the writings of Henry Stern, a Jewish convert to Christianity who worked among the Beta Israel on behalf of the London Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews, in *Wanderings Among the Falashas in Abyssinia With a Description of the Country and Its Various Inhabitants*. First ed., 1862; Second ed., London, 1968.
5. Although the Beta Israel are black, I found the issue of skin color and race to be largely insignificant in Israel throughout my fieldwork.
6. S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: Vol. IV, Daily Life*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 1983), p. xi.
7. *Ibid.*, p. xii.
8. Schoenberger, p. 20. See also Kay Kaufman Shelemay, "The Beta Israel in Twentieth-Century Ethiopia" in *The Jews of Ethiopia: A People in Transition* ed. by Yossi Avner, et. al. (Tel-Aviv: Beth Hatefutsoth, The Nahum Goldmann Museum of the Jewish Diaspora, 1986), p. 47.
9. Shelemay, p. 43.
10. Steven Kaplan, "A Brief History of the Beta Israel" in *The Jews of Ethiopia: A People in Transition* ed. by Yossi Avner, et. al. (Tel-Aviv: Beth Hatefutsoth, The Nahum Goldmann Museum of the Jewish Diaspora, 1986), p.17.
11. Negative stigmas are attached to metalworkers and artisans who use fire in their crafts in many societies. In Morocco for example, jewelers were believed to possess the powers of the evil eye. See Yedida K. Stillman, "A Moroccan Jeweler and His Art: Continuity and Change," in *Pe'amim* no. 17, 1983. pp. 96-97 [Hebrew].
12. Schoenberger, pp. 40-41.
13. According to Simon D. Messing (*The Story of the Falashas: "Black Jews of Ethiopia,"* Brooklyn, 1982, p. 30), the idea of producing clay figurines for sale "... was noticed in the early 1960s by the European wife of an American physician in Gondar who wanted to promote the tourist trade to benefit the Gondar Women's Patriotic Association. Mrs. Franz Rosa showed pictures of pre-historic art to the Falasha women of nearby villages, and they readily proceeded to initiating simple figurines of cows, horses and even fertility figures." Schoenberger (pp. 134-137), on the other hand, attributes the founding of the figurine tradition in Wolleka to an elderly woman named Takai Elias, who is said to be the first to have created figurines out of her imagination for sale to tourists, only to be copied by younger, more agile women who expanded the trade.
14. Girma Kidane and Richard Wilding, *The Ethiopian Cultural Heritage*. (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: 1976), p. 48.
15. Shelemay, p. 47.
16. In recent years, the government of Ethiopia has sought to unite minority groups and bring them closer to the mainstream of Ethiopian society through the processes of "Amharization" and "village-ization." Amharization entails the spread of the Amharic language, culture, and religion to non-Amhara Ethiopians. To further this end, the government village-ization program relocates agrarian and crafts people, placing them in new villages of mixed ethnic groups to encourage assimilation and acculturation of the minorities into the Amhara majority. These processes, combined with general westernization and modernization, have resulted in a breakdown of some of the traditional life of the various religious and ethnic groups throughout Ethiopia.

*Collections:* Objects shown in this catalog are from the following collections:

North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry—p. 11 tools, p. 12 man with animal figurine, p. 13 figurine, p. 16 shawl and dress.  
Lynn Gamwell—p. 12 religious figurine.  
Norman and Yedida Stillman—p. 12 man with *injera* figurine.  
H. Edward Weberman—p. 11 knives.  
David I. and Sandra Becker—all other objects.

*Photo credits:* Objects and artwork by Chris Focht; cover photo and pp. 3, 5, 8, 10, 15, 16 (inset) by David I. Becker; pp. 9, 14 (women weaving and spinning), 18 by H. Edward Weberman.

Beta Israel woman selling ceramic figurines in Wolleka, Ethiopia, 1984.

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