The Contribution of Radio in the Absorption Process of Illiterate Ethiopian Jews in Israel


For nearly 2,500 years, Jews lived in Ethiopia isolated from the general population and the rest of the Jewish world. The Ethiopian Jewish community settled in remote rural villages the result of the ostracism of the general (non-Jewish native) population, as well as the communal desire to prevent assimilation. Long considered part of the “developing world”, Ethiopia’s technological development was slow and minimal over the years. Where development did occur, it centered primarily in the urban areas, distant from the Jewish settlement areas. As a result, the majority of the Ethiopian Jews resided in areas without running water, electricity, paved roads, a formal education or healthcare system, leaving many illiterate—unable to either read or write.

The research examines the contributions of the Amharic language radio broadcasts in the absorption process for the Ethiopian Israel community. We designed questionnaires used to interview Ethiopians within the community that evaluated their listening practices—amount of time listening, their preferred and popular kinds of programs, and the extent the radio broadcasts assisted them in their absorption.

Today there are many immigrants from developing world countries relocating to developed countries. The gaps between the country of origin and the country of destination present the same kinds of obstacles to absorption as those experienced by the Ethiopian community in Israel. The research findings can demonstrate the influence of “mother tongue” radio broadcasts on the absorption process to their new country assisting in the decision-making in many countries on determining the most effective and efficient methods that best contribute to the assimilation of newly arrived immigrants into their new host society.

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This article examines how special radio programmes broadcast in Amharic (Ethiopian national language) by the Israel Broadcasting Authority (IBA) has contributed to the integration of illiterate immigrants from the African continent into Israeli society.
The Palestine Broadcasting Authority, established on March 30, 1936, was the precursor to the Israel Broadcasting Authority. During the British mandate in Palestine it was decided to broadcast in three languages: Arabic, English and Hebrew under the jurisdiction of the BBC. This decision was made in order to serve three distinct populations; the British army and mandate officials stationed in Palestine, the Jewish community, and the Palestinian Arab community. In 1942, as a result of reports about the Holocaust, Jewish leaders in Palestine put pressure on the British authorities, to not only broadcast internally in Palestine, but also to Jewish refugees fleeing the Holocaust and living in refugee camps, such as in Cyprus.

On the eve of Israel’s declaration of Independence, May 14, 1948, the Palestine Broadcasting Authority became the Voice of Israel. An interesting historical fact: The Voice of Israel broadcast Israel’s declaration of independence by their first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, on the May 14, 1948 in Hebrew, English, French and Yiddisch. It was broadcast in Yiddish because 100,000 Jews had arrived in Israel from Eastern European countries, where Jews spoke Yiddish. There was later an influx of Polish refugees and so the radio station also started to broadcast in Polish. David Ben Gurion wished to strengthen the links between Israel and Diaspora Jews, especially those living in countries under the yoke of communism. Therefore, on March 11, 1950, a new radio station was established in Israel which was broadcast by short wave in English, French and Yiddish to those Jews living behind the iron curtain and was called “The Voice of Zion to the Diaspora.” The radio station was funded by the World Zionist Organization. The anti-Zionist communist regime in Moscow would jam the radio frequency, preventing Jews living in communist countries from being able to listen to these broadcasts. They did so to prevent Jews in these countries from listening to broadcasts they defined as ‘Zionist’ and ‘western propaganda.’

The state of Israel was established to absorb Jewish immigrants from all over the world. In 1959, the Voice of Israel began broadcasting in Russian, Hungarian, Romanian, Magreb, Persian and Italian. It broadcast in a total of 15 languages. The purpose of these language programmes was to give news to new immigrants as a way of helping them integrate into Israeli society and at the same time to also inform Jews living in the diaspora. In 1960, with the start of the decolonization process in Africa, Israel began broadcasting to a number of African countries such as Kenya and Tanzania, even including native African languages such as Swahili. This was part of its diplomatic offensive to strengthen ties between Israel and newly independent African
countries. Later on, broadcasting was extended to America, Canada and South America.

The radio broadcasts, being part of Israel’s diplomatic offensive, were very helpful to the work of the foreign ministry. An analogy can be made with Al Jazeera. Al Jazerra was predominantly set up to bring the message of the Arab world to the West. Similarly, Israel used its radio broadcasts to try and spread its message and influence opinion in the West, Eastern Europe and on the African continent. It can be stated that Israel has a long tradition of broadcasting in different languages, using radio as the medium.

Up until 1965, the Israel Broadcasting Authority was under the jurisdiction of the Prime Minister’s office, but clearly if something is run from the Prime Minister’s office, there are question marks about the neutrality of what is broadcast. Therefore, in 1965, a law was passed which in effect made the IBA independent from government control, based on the model of the BBC. There had previously been a fact finding mission by senior employees to BBC in London for the purpose of learning how the BBC operates. This model was implemented in Israel. (Caspi and Limor, 2008).

Today, the Voice of Israel broadcasts on 8 channels, including R.E.K.A, (established in May 1991,) a radio station purely devoted to foreign languages, especially for new immigrants and foreign nationals living in Israel, One of the languages is Amharic.

**Amharic Radio**

The broadcasting in Amharic for the Ethiopian community started in May 1985 as a result of 8,000 Ethiopian Jews arriving in Israel in Operation Moses. For the first year only 10 minutes a day was devoted to broadcasting in Amharic and this only dealt with news. The radio programmes were funded by the Jewish Agency for the first three years and taken over by the IBA. The employees involved in this were randomly drawn from the community on the basis of knowing Amharic, Hebrew and English, but who had no experience of journalism. The programme was basically translations of news from Reuters and the Israel News Agency. After the initial year, the programme in Amharic became 15 minutes long. In May 1991, after Operation Solomon, which saw almost 15,000 Ethiopian Jews airlifted from Addis Ababa to Israel, there was clearly a greater demand for news in Amharic and everyday information. A decision was therefore taken to increase the
broadcast time to 2 hours. The programme had a very high following, with 90% of the community listening to these radio programmes.

**Background to the Ethiopian Jewish Community**

There are three theories on how the Ethiopian Jewish community arrived in Ethiopia. Firstly, it has been claimed that the community is one of the lost tribes of Israel, and was in fact recognized by the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel, Ovadia Yosef, in 1973 as the lost tribe of Dan.

The second theory is the legend of King Solomon and Makeda, the Ethiopian Queen of Sheba, who after her visit to Jerusalem returned to Ethiopia with the lost ark and a number of Jews, who then established a Jewish community in her country. In fact, many people are unaware that there used to be a Jewish Kingdom in Ethiopia up until the 14th century.

The third theory is that a group of Yemeni Jews left Yemen for trading reasons and established a community in Ethiopia. This is not unusual in Jewish communities where they were established because of trade. For example, in Spain and in Portugal (Melaku, 2014).

Nobody knows exactly how or when the Jews arrived and settled in Ethiopia, a land known as Cush in the Bible.

Some scholars believe that they had settled there some three thousand years ago, during the reign of King Solomon and the Cushite Queen of Sheba. Others suggest that survivors of the tribes of Dan, Naphtali, and Gad fled to Egypt after the Babylonians destroyed the kingdom of Judah and the First Temple in 586 BCE. Then they followed the Blue Nile to northern Ethiopia, and made their homes on its fertile soil. There are also those who believe that they fled Jerusalem after the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 CE. Although our origins are somewhat obscure, the latter course of our history is undisputed:

By the tenth century CE a flourishing autonomous Falasha (Ethiopian Jewish) Kingdom encompassed as many as one million people. For several centuries, this Jewish kingdom held its own against Christian and Muslim antagonists. But by the early seventeenth century, the Falashas were overwhelmed, and their land confiscated. Many were sold into slavery, and those who remained were forced to convert to Christianity. Only after years of poverty and suffering were the remnants of the once- proud Jewish kingdom permitted to resume practicing their religion. (Tegegne and Pinchuk, 2008: 1-2).
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Jewish Life in Ethiopia

Geography

Ethiopian Jews known as Beta Israel, the House of Israel, lived in the North-western part of Ethiopia in very rural areas, unlike other Jewish communities around the world who generally lived in cities. The life was simple, very underdeveloped, with no electricity, no running water, formal education or health care. The community lived in Jewish villages, fearing the loss of losing their identity and assimilation (Pe’amim, 1985 and 1987).

Traditions and Customs of the Community

The community was very patriarchal. The father was the head of the family and had total respect from other family members. All the decisions in the community were made by the Kessim, the religious leaders of the community, and the men of the village. There was respect paid towards the elderly, in contrast to Israeli society (Pe’amim, 1985 and 1987).

Anti-Semitism and Discrimination

The Ethiopian Jewish community as has been noted up until the 14th century was a very strong community. Since then its strength has declined for various reasons including some converting to Christianity as a result of missionary activities. Over time those who held firm to Judaism became a despised minority. The wider community used a pejorative term about the Ethiopian Jews, who came to be known as Falasha, meaning outsiders and strangers. If you were to go to Ethiopia today, the wider community still refers to the Beta Israel as Falashas. As a result of this negative view, the Jewish community was discriminated against. Jews were not allowed to own land and had to pay extortionate rent to farm land. As a consequence, many Jews had to find a different way to make a living, like pottery, silversmith and weaving. These became known as Jewish professions in Ethiopia. The wider community was very suspicious of the Ethiopian Jewish community, accusing them of all kinds of evil acts. They accused the community of having an evil eye on the wider community. If anyone was sick in the non-Jewish community, the Jewish community was blamed for it because of its evil ways. They believed that the community had supernatural evil powers
and that they could turn into wild animals at night. This was all nonsense of course; pure anti-Semitism and discrimination against the Ethiopian Jewish community for one reason alone, that they were Jews (Salamon, 1999).

**Social and Economic status of the Community**

As a result of the discrimination and the way the community was perceived, the community was poorer than the wider community. This was a price they knew they had to pay in order to remain steadfast to Judaism. The community dwelled alone in Jewish villages and had limited interaction with the wider non-Jewish world, such as when non-Jewish Ethiopians would come to buy pottery or when Jews would go to the market.

**The relationship between the Ethiopian Jewish community and the wider Jewish community**

Deep in the rocky terrain of northern Ethiopia, a tribe of Jews lived in isolation for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. They were agrarians and craftsmen, trading pottery and crude tools with neighbouring tribes. For years they struggled to survive against famine and poverty and the marauding armies of their Christian and Muslim neighbours (Naim, 2003).

Until 1770 with the visit of the Scottish traveller James Bruce to Ethiopia (Abyssinia), the Falashas were virtually unknown to the wider world. He was one of the first people to describe “the history, language, and religion which was more objective than anything which had previously appeared and he had no doubt that he had observed and talked to members of a once powerful Jewish sect” (Kessler, 1982).

“James Bruce’s Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile,” first published in 1790, described his adventures in Abyssinia (Ethiopia) from 1769 to 1771.

Bruce’s five volumes also contained the first eye witness account of the Falashas since a few stray references to them had appeared in the reports of Portuguese and Spanish soldiers and missionaries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The Jewish anthropologist Joseph Halevy (1827-1917), living in France, read James Bruce’s account and he was commissioned by western Jewry to make contact with the Falashas. Incidentally, the Ethiopian community was unaware that there were white Jews until they met Jews such as Halevy.
Jacque Faitlovich, (1881-1955), a Polish Jew, fought a single handed battle throughout his life to bring the plight of the Falashas to world Jewry. He did more than any other individual to put the plight of Ethiopian Jews on the agenda of world Jewry, despite the fact that he was not successful in getting the community recognized by them. He established a number of Jewish schools in Ethiopia and he sponsored 25 students from the community to study in Jewish religious schools in Europe and the Middle East and still all this despite the lack of recognition of them as Jews.

The return to the Holy Land

The community has a unique Jewish holiday called Sigd, a fast day in which each year they would pray on top of a high mountain, symbolically representing Mount Sinai, for their return to Jerusalem in the Holy Land. There were several attempts to return to Jerusalem, but they always ended in failure as it is impossible to walk from Ethiopia to Israel. The state of Israel had stubbornly refused to recognize Ethiopian Jewry and that is why with the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, the law of return did not apply to them. This state of affairs continued until 1973 when as has been noted Sephardi Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef recognized the community as the tribe of Dan who should be rescued and brought to Israel.

This led to the Jews of Ethiopia coming to the state of Israel in two great waves of immigration. Operation Moses, 1984-1985, brought about 10,000 immigrants to Israel. (Parfitt 1985) Operation Solomon, May 1991, brought nearly 15,000 immigrants to Israel. (Naim 2003)

Operation Moses

Operation Moses was a secret operation. The operation was named after the exodus story of the Israelites leaving Egypt. The communist regime of Megnistu viewed Israel as part of the western sphere of influence and would not allow Ethiopian Jews to immigrate directly to Israel. The Israeli intelligence sent agents to Jewish villages in Ethiopia and told them to walk to Sudan, where they would be secretly airlifted by the Israeli Air Force to Israel. There were no diplomatic relations between Israel and Sudan and the operation was conducted totally in secret by the Israeli Air Force and Navy. Tragically 4,000 Jews lost their lives while trekking to Sudan and also in the refugee camps. They died there from hunger and starvation as
they waited to be airlifted to Israel, which was a very long process (Parfitt, 1985) Operation Moses).

**Operation Solomon**

The Operation took place two days before the communist regime of Megnistu fell from power in 1991. The Ethiopian rebels who were in a civil war with the Megnistu regime were on the verge of entering the capital city of Addis Ababa on the 24th and 25th of May 1991. They held off from entering the city following an agreement between the rebel leadership led by Meles Zenaw, later to become Prime Minister of Ethiopia, and the American and Israeli government. It stated that the rebel forces would not enter the city in order to give the Israeli government time to arrange an airlift of all those that had gathered in Addis Ababa. Within 36 hours, 14,310 people had been flown to Israel; an operation coordinated by the Israeli army but carried out by the Israeli Air Force and also Special Forces. The operation set the record for the most passengers on a civilian flight (Feldmann, 2012; Naim, 2003).

**The Community in Israel**

The community had great difficulty in adjusting to life in Israel. The community was exported overnight from a very underdeveloped society to an advanced one. Another major issue was that many people in the community were illiterate even in their own native language of Amharic, let alone Hebrew. This inability to read and write in Hebrew prevented them from finding work, from undertaking training courses for various positions and from knowing what was happening in the country on a day to day basis as they sadly could not follow the news in Hebrew. Their children’s integration into the schooling system was detrimentally affected by their parent’s inability to be involved in the schooling system and by their inability to help their children with homework to succeed educationally.

The radio broadcasts in Amharic played a crucial role in helping these illiterate immigrants to integrate into Israeli society. The structure of the programmes was unique. Other programmes in foreign languages were devoted solely to news. The programmes in Amharic had a news section, but in recognition of the special needs of the community, and in view of the community’s illiteracy, the programme devoted a large segment to practical, everyday living – for example, how to register your child into a school, how
to register with the health system and how to open a bank account were just a few. It has to be remembered that these concepts were completely alien to many in the community. For example, opening a bank account in the rural villages of Gondar in Ethiopia where the Jewish community came from was unheard of.

The community would look forward to listening to the programmes in Amharic daily as this was their only source of information and they were totally dependent on the programmes in Amharic for everyday life. It is for this reason that over 90% of the community would listen to these programmes and it gave them an insight into Israeli society. The younger generation, born in Israel, or who came to Israel at a young age, grew up with Hebrew in the schooling system. Yet many of them listened to the programmes in Amharic for a couple of reasons; to improve their Amharic, as in many instances Hebrew is their first language. They also want to be able to communicate with their family and not lose the ability to speak the language that their community spoke for over 2,000 years. It is a fact that a lot of Ethiopian graduates find it difficult to break into the wider market, and as a consequence a lot of them end up working in the community. They need to be able to understand and follow the issues that are debated in Amharic on the radio station. Furthermore, individuals who work in the community also use the radio station to advertise events for the community. For example, recently there was an event devoted to Ethiopian literature and this was advertised on Amharic radio for members of the community to attend. Another example is that government agencies such as the Ministry of Health use the radio station to promote services that they are providing. More crucially, during times of armed conflict which has seen missiles fired into Israel, the Israel Home Front Command uses the broadcasts to pass on vital information to the community, such as how to put on a gas mask and where the nearest bomb shelters are located. During the General Election in Israel, various political parties run election broadcasts in Amharic to entice members of the community to vote for their party because they know that large numbers of the community are not fluent in Hebrew and the only way they can get across their message is via the programmes in Amharic.

**Conclusion**

The radio programmes in Amharic have proven to be an invaluable source of information to the community. Many have described them as a lifeline
and it has been beneficial in contributing to the integration of the community into Israeli society. In the early years, the service had a listenership of over 90% and still has a high listenership which is evidence of the high regard in which it is held. There is also the issue of convenience. Radio is an inexpensive and effective way to get a message across to poor communities like the Ethiopian community. Many people listen to the broadcasts at work on their smartphones, for example while working in gardening or as bus drivers who can listen to the programmes while driving. The issue of broadcasting programmes which are not solely devoted to news in a foreign language has international implications in terms of integrating illiterate immigrants into advanced western societies. The Amharic model in Israel is one that should be implemented in other countries for the benefit of integrating new immigrants into that society.

References


An Israeli–Ethiopian women shouts at a police officer during the 2015 protests against police brutality and discrimination against Ethiopian Jews. Fighting against racism. Even during the immigration process, Ethiopian Jews were treated differently from other Jews who came to Israel. They had to spend more time in the absorption centers for example â€” temporary living quarters where immigrants are given intensive Hebrew lessons â€” and could only settle in certain areas afterwards, much like Jews from Arab countries. The prominent radio journalist was active during the blood scandal protests in the 1990s, and took to the streets again in 2015. "It's not enough to just create new jobs," says Melaku, who came to Israel as a 16-year-old through 'Operation Moses' in 1985. Ethiopian Jews in Israel. From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. Ethiopian Jews in Israel. Languages. Hebrew · Amharic · Tigrinya. Ethiopian Beta Israel are gradually becoming part of the mainstream Israeli society in religious life, military service (with nearly all males doing national service), education, and politics. Similarly to other groups of immigrant Jews, who made aliyah to Israel, the Ethiopian Beta Israel have faced obstacles in their integration to Israeli society. To prepare for the absorption of tens of thousands of Ethiopian Beta Israel, the State of Israel prepared two 'Master Plans' (Ministry of Absorption, 1985, 1991). The first was prepared in 1985, a year after the arrival of the first wave of immigrants.