

# Three Faiths *in the Jungle*

*Two intrepid halakhic adventurers  
recite psalms with Christian monks and  
compare headgear with friendly Muslims  
in Addis Ababa*

**Ari Greenspan and Ari Zivotofsky**



**T**he medieval monasteries on the isolated islands of Lake Tana are home to a particularly unusual order of monks, some so strict that no women are allowed to set foot on their islands at all. Monkeys chattered in the treetops of the dense forest as we walked on narrow dirt footpaths, skirting clumps of wild coffee and bountiful guava. Suddenly turning a corner, we came upon an old stone building flanked by a priest dressed in white. Our guide addressed him as “*abba*”, father. Under his arm was a large, ancient book whose parchment pages were hand-sewn. I asked him through the translator what book he was holding, but his answer needed no translation; “*Mizmorei le-david*,” David’s Psalms. Not believing my ears, I asked him to turn to Psalm 23 and together, I in Hebrew and he in the religious language of Ge-ez, we recited tehillim together.

Among Christian sects, the Coptic Church is one of the most similar to its parent religion of Judaism. In addition to the overlap of religious texts, there are similarities in ritual. Both the Coptics and Beta Israel (the Ethiopian Jews) wash their hands before and after meals. Both follow dietary laws regulating the way an animal is slaughtered and abstain from pork. The monk or priest played a significant role in the religious life of both Ethiopian Christians and Jews. Circumcision, known by the Hebrew sounding word *gezrat*, was practiced by all Ethiopians.

### A Familiar Ring

Overall, the Ethiopian people have very positive feelings about Jews and Israelis. Whether we were walking through the congested streets of the capital of Addis Ababa or the narrow alleyways of the ancient mountain capital of Gondar City, locals stopped us to ask if we were from Israel, and to smile broadly when we replied in the affirmative, declaring “we love Israel,” in the warmest of tones. The official language in Ethiopia is Amharic, a Semitic language in which many words are identical or similar to their Hebrew equivalents; when locals hear Hebrew spoken they will often answer excitedly.

Emperor Haile Selassie, who ruled the country from 1930 to 1974, with a five year colonial hiatus, was the scion of a royal tradition going back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. According to tradition, he was directly descended from Menelik I, son of King Solomon and the Queen

of Sheba. His name, Selassie, means “shalosh” or three, a direct reference to the power of the trinity. He also referred to himself as the Lion of Judah, emphasizing his proud connection to King Solomon. A religious Ethiopian Orthodox Christian, he was revered by the Rastafarian movement as god incarnate, an example of the blurring of religion and state associated with this brand of Christianity. The fence girding the presidential residence, formerly the palace of the emperor, is decorated with lions and the Star of David.

### Beyond the Pale

Despite the apparent close ties between Judaism and the Coptic Church, Ethiopians have not always proved good neighbors to their Jewish counterparts. In 1860, Rabbi Jacob Sapir, a Jerusalem based scholar better known by the name of his book, *Even Sapir*, undertook a four year trek from Jerusalem to Egypt, Sudan, Yemen, India, Sri Lanka, New Zealand and Australia. He meticulously recorded all of his interactions with the Jews he met on his travels, including details of the particular traditions observed in each community. Writing in 1864-1865 for *HaLevanon*, the first Hebrew newspaper in Israel, he described the pitiful conditions and discriminatory treatment suffered by Ethiopian Jews under the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. This information only came to light as a result of the missionary activities of the Anglican Church, whose emissaries were traversing Africa trying to convert everyone they could.

The missionaries from there announced that they had found Jews in the land of Kush-Habash numbering about 250,000 souls. They are called Faleshet in the local language, perhaps a reference to their origins in Palestine [modern scholarship derives it from the Ethiopic fallasa – to emigrate]. They are very different from the local gentiles (various Christians and Mohammedans,) who will have nothing to do with them. They are distanced and demeaned by the indigenous people, so disgusted are they that they will not touch their clothing and do not even talk to them... Some six years ago (1858) a father and son, both Jewish, came from there [to Jerusalem], Daniel and Moshe were their names ... they spoke nothing except for Habashi.....After spending about 6 months here in the space of which some details

Facing page: An Ethiopian monk on one of the islands of Lake Tana

Photo: Mark Wararat



about them were gathered, they returned to their land to tell their brothers what they had seen. But this much was gleaned; they still perform sacrifices on altars to the true God.

The writer passionately insisted that someone should be sent there to teach and support the Ethiopian community, with funding from the recently formed Alliance Israélite Universelle. Founded by Adolf Cremieux in Paris, the Alliance's goals were to bring Jewish communities throughout the world to self-sufficiency by means of modern education. Ultimately, a Semitic scholar and early protagonist of the use of the Hebrew language, Joseph HaLevi, was sent with the approbation of the Malbim, then the chief rabbi of Bucharest. His extensive reports to the Alliance were ultimately successful in bringing the situation and aspirations of Ethiopian Jews to the attention of continental

and specifically, British Jewry.

Unfortunately, Christian missionary organizations are still active in Ethiopia, some with the specific goal of converting Jews. In the summer of 2009, after a visit to the flourishing NACOEJ (North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry) compound, we came across another building that looked like a synagogue, complete with a *mehitza* and the Ten Commandments on the wall in Hebrew. The walls were painted blue and white, and the structure was decked out with a large Star of David on the peak of the roof, flanked by Israeli and Ethiopian flags. Surprised, we inquired as to its providence and were told that it was run by American Christian missionaries.

### The Jew's Mosque

Comparing what we saw on our early visits in the mid 1980's with the situation today, the Muslim minority in Ethiopia is growing at a

Facing page: Well disguised, inside and out, a Christian missionary station masquerades as a synagogue, complete with a *mehitza* and the Ten Commandments on the wall in Hebrew. Note the large Star of David on the peak of the roof, flanked by Israeli and Ethiopian flags

Below: The kaffia is less threatening in Addis Ababa. Ari Greenspan with an elderly Ethiopian



dramatic rate, placing the ultimate dominance of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and its future centrality in question. Tens of shops selling Muslim headgear and religious books, men wearing full-length *gelabias*, *kaffiot*, and worry beads are evident where a few decades ago there were none. On the surface though, at least, this does not appear to be the radical Islam we see multiplying worldwide. The gentle Ethiopian soul and even the singsong sounds of the language reflect a tender culture. In many households, Christian and Muslim family members live in harmony. It is possible that the fact that they speak Amharic and not Arabic insulates them from the anti-Jewish vitriol so common in the Arab world..

Walking down a street once, wearing my *kippa*, an stately old Muslim man with a white embroidered cap of his own saw me, reached out his hand, and smiled. Instinctively, I shook it and said *Shalom Aleichem*. His response, just as natural, was *aleikem salom*.

We have often walked down the street called *Bnei Sefer* – “the people of the book,” where the synagogue stands in the once flourishing Jewish neighborhood built by Jews from Aden. Today it is overshadowed by the massive, Saudi-funded, central mosque of Addis Ababa.

The story of the community from Aden is a tale unto itself. Britain conquered the strategic port, located at the southern tip of Arabia, in 1839. Straddling the all-important entrance to the Red Sea, the gateway to the Indian Ocean, Aden became a hub of commercial opportunity. Trade routes opened up, and the Jews, many of whom were of Indian and Iraqi origin and had always seen themselves as more cosmopolitan and educated than their more traditional cousins in the north of the country, made their way to Ethiopia to do business. In those days there were few Muslims in Ethiopia. The wealthy Benin family had undertaken a number of building projects but was dissatisfied with the local workers. They brought over men from Aden to replace them, who built the present synagogue, originally the cash house of the family. Mr. Benin paid them to erect a small Mosque for themselves as well. Today, the huge central mosque of Ethiopia, largely financed by an Arabian Sheik, stands in the neighborhood built by the religious Jew, Benin, a century earlier. It is known as *Misgad Benin* or the mosque of Benin. Little do they know the central mosque is named for a pious Jew.



amic duo see: [www.halachicadventures.com](http://www.halachicadventures.com)

For more details of the travels and research of the dy-