



# Buried in AFRICA

PHOTOS & TEXT BY Ari Z. Zivotofsky and Ari Greenspan

## We'd been to Ethiopia numerous times since the 1980s,

and our latest jaunt was actually just a few-day stopover on the way to Uganda (that's for another time). Yet all our previous visits centered around the Gondar region, the area where about 90 percent of Ethiopian Jews originated, and on this trip we decided to go somewhere different — we wanted to see the remnants of the Jews of Tigray.

Our schedule was tight: Shabbos was to be spent with Israeli friends — including the Israeli ambassador to Ethiopia — in Addis Ababa. That left us Friday to *shecht* for the Jews of Ethiopia and only Thursday to explore the northern area of Tigray.

Timing was everything, and we finally found the man who could put it together for us: Amram Aklom. He is a native son, an expert on the Jews of Tigray, has led groups back on “roots tours,” and his brother Fereda Aklom was a larger-than-life hero who was pivotal in the secret Operation Moses airlift at the end of 1984.

Our own connection with the Beta Yisrael, or Ethiopian Jews, actually goes back to the mid-1980s, when we traveled there on several missions for the North American Conference of Ethiopian Jewry (NACOEJ). The first question people asked then was: Who are they? Whether they are descendents of Shlomo HaMelech and the Queen of Sheba, locals who were converted by Yemenite Jews over the centuries, descendants of Jews from southern Egypt (Elephantine) who made their way down the Nile, or just a “Jewish-like” Christian sect, what is indisputable is

that throughout the centuries they kept their own identity and were reviled by their neighbors as Jews, called a host of derogatory names including *falasha*, meaning stranger in Ge'ez, and *buda*, meaning evil eye.

Although there is no way to definitively prove their origins, in 1973 Rav Ovadiah Yosef ruled — based on centuries-old *piskei halachah* — that the Ethiopian Jews are fully Jewish, accepting an alternate theory they themselves propound, that they are descended from the Tribe of Dan. Not all *poskim* agreed. Rav Moshe Feinstein's letter on the subject was typical of those who did not fully accept their Jewishness. He stated then that we are dealing with people who want to live as Jews, are literally dying to be Jewish, and it is a mitzvah to help them. In fact, after the first mass airlift, the Chief Rabbinate instituted a policy of *giyur l'chumrah*, which would unequivocally fix various problems of lineage and status.

When Menachem Begin was elected prime minister of Israel in 1977, one of his first actions was to get the Ethiopians recognized as Jews for purposes of the Law of Return, and then directing the head of the Mossad to arrange their aliyah.

And this is where Fereda Aklom comes into the picture.

Fereda was born in 1949 in the northern Ethiopian province of Tigray. Like Jews around the world, his parents pushed him to get an education so that he could get ahead in life. He studied education in

## Buried in Africa

Addis Ababa and in 1976 was appointed principal of a school. He then convinced ORT — a secular, international Jewish nonprofit organization that promotes vocational training and education — to open two schools in Tigray, and was soon after appointed head of the city council in his town of Inda Aba Guna.

The following year, in 1977, Israel and Ethiopia signed a “guns-for-Jews” deal that the Ethiopians demanded be absolutely secret. Fereda organized the transport of Jews from the north to Addis Ababa, from where they would be airlifted to Israel. But following the aliyah of the first 200 people, then-foreign minister Moshe Dayan revealed the operation in a press conference. The Ethiopian government instantly terminated the deal, froze ties with Israel, and expelled all Israelis. Fereda was threatened with the death penalty and fled to Sudan. With the cash from selling his wedding ring, he sent desperate cables to the US, Canada, and the Geneva ORT office relaying his whereabouts and requesting assistance in getting to Israel. He then spent months living in the alleys of Sudan scrounging for food to survive. The Geneva letter eventually made its way to the Mossad office in Tel Aviv.

Meanwhile, due to political instability in Ethiopia, Christian and Muslim refugees were streaming across the Sudanese border, and that letter planted a wild idea in a Mossad agent’s head. He transmitted a message to Fereda: Stay put. The idea was to have the Jews join this exodus into Muslim, anti-Israel Sudan and from there the Mossad, which as yet had no infrastructure in Sudan, would somehow get them out.

Soon Fereda found himself in the center of a top-secret mission to transfer the Ethiopian Jews to Israel via Sudan. Fereda’s story is complicated and often harrowing — he spent several years operating in hostile territory as a lone wolf until the Sudanese secret police put a bounty on his head. He managed to get to Israel, but not before laying the groundwork for Operation Moses, a complex alliance between the Israel Defense Forces, the CIA, the US embassy in Khartoum, mercenaries, and Sudanese state security forces.

From November 21, 1984, to January 5, 1985,

the operation flew some 7,800 Ethiopian Jews from Sudan directly to Israel. Thousands of Beta Yisrael had fled Ethiopia on foot for refugee camps in Sudan; an estimated 4,000 died during the grueling, dangerous trek. The operation was abruptly terminated by the Sudanese on January 5, 1985, after Prime Minister Shimon Peres publicly confirmed the airlift, leaving some 1,000 Ethiopian Jews stranded in hostile territory. Many were evacuated later in the US-led Operation Joshua, and six years later, Operation Solomon brought an additional 14,000 Beta Yisrael to Israel directly from Ethiopia.

Fereda settled in Beer Sheva but continued to make numerous trips back to neighboring African countries in order to help his brethren, until his untimely passing in early 2009, during a visit to Addis. And while Fereda was the legendary hero, his brother Amram modestly admits that he and another brother were no small part of the clandestine operation in Sudan.

**Message from the Mossad** When we made our first trips to Ethiopia in the mid-1980s soon after Operation Moses, many families had been separated, as it was the able-bodied young people who were able to make the journey to Sudan. Many women with children and the elderly stayed behind.

With the passage of time we can finally expose the following story.

As young 20-somethings, we traveled deep into the wilds of Africa on a mission. Today, a cell phone works everywhere, but in those days, there were barely any telephones. Once you got to your destination, you were incomunicado, in an enemy country with no real contact with the outside world.

Via NACOEJ, we had been entrusted with a message from the Mossad. We were to inform specific people that a particular “bus stop” in Sudan that had been a contact point was now dangerous and not to be visited. We were told to reach a certain Sheffero Desi in the town of Bahar Dar on the southern tip of Lake Tana and give him the message. Both the streets and floors of Bahar Dar were dirt, and there were



**A yahrtzeit candle left on a grave in Tigray by a relative from Israel is one remnant of Jewish life in this northern province (top). Back in the 1980s, Ari and Ari — on a mission from the Mossad — enjoy a salami on Lake Tana**

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no house numbers. Being the only whites in town, we attracted an entourage of kids who followed us. We finally found what we thought was his house and walked in. The house had no Jewish symbols, for that would have meant imprisonment or worse, but as we looked up on the walls around the single room, we saw a poster of people on a beach. We noticed that there was Hebrew writing on it and realized that it was from an Israeli paper. That was the sole Jewish symbol he could have in his life.

Sheffero wasn’t home, but his son told us to come back after dark. That night, trying to retrace our steps, we suddenly heard footsteps chasing us, followed by a whispered “shalom.” It was Sheffero. He made us jump a ditch and quickly took us across a muddy field into a *tuckle*, the round mud hut with a thatched roof that is a typical Ethiopian house. Inside, with cow skins on the walls and a bench going around the room, were ten men, each of whom told us his tale of woe and oppression. One man was a cashier in a hotel and \$500 — more than a year’s salary — was found missing. He was being blamed and stood to go to prison for many years. We understood that we had the rare opportunity to fulfill the mitzvah of *pidyon shvuyim*, the redemption of prisoners. We gave him the money in front of everybody and he was saved from jail.

Today Sheffero’s family lives in Beit Shemesh, and we’ve stayed in touch, with Ari G. treating some of his kids in his dental clinic. Before our 2009 trip back to Ethiopia we contacted Sheffero, who informed us that his wife was there and we should meet her. Nineteen years earlier, her brother tried to escape to Sudan to get to Israel, but he was never heard from again and presumed dead. Suddenly, out of the blue he contacted them. He had been imprisoned for all those years and was finally freed and she had gone to see him. It wasn’t exactly Beit Shemesh, but we met up with her in a hotel in Gondar City.

On another occasion, Ari G. was at a wedding in Jerusalem and spotted a familiar-looking Ethiopian chef. The chef recognized Ari and explained that he was Sheffero’s son Abebe. Ari told him that when Abebe had his first baby boy, Ari wanted to do the bris. True to



**The “Ark” is supposedly kept in an armed building and guarded by one priest, although no one has ever seen it**

**With back-to-basics farming, we could finally understand the art of winnowing. Plus, we learned why oxen shouldn't be muzzled. They love to snack while they work**



his word, Abebe called Ari G. in 2012 with the good news and a request to be the baby's *mohel*. It was a defining moment in a relationship between two sets of such different Jews that had stretched over 30 years and three generations.

It was a difficult time for Ethiopia in the late 1980s, when we first visited. The last emperor of Ethiopia was Haile Selassie I, heir to a dynasty that claimed to trace its lineage back to King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (known in Ethiopia as Queen Makeda, Empress of Aksum). He ruled from 1930 until he was violently deposed in 1974 by a radical Marxist, Mengistu Haile Mariam. Mengistu's reign of terror is believed to have claimed the lives of over 1.2 million people. Before returning the bodies of loved ones, the regime would bill families of its victims for the bullets expended in executions. Obviously, the mere suggestion of involvement in Zionist activity in Ethiopia was enough to get one jailed and tortured. The brutal Mengistu reign was dominated by numerous wars, rebellions, and famines. Among the many factions fighting the regime at the time was the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), and although there were still Jews and ancient Jewish sites in Tigray, throughout the '80s and early '90s it was unsafe for us to visit the region. Now, years later, we decided that the time had come to explore the region and see what Jewish memories remain.

**On to Aksum** We had arranged that we would be back in Addis for Shabbos, so when we landed from Israel at 5 a.m. Thursday morning we hopped on a flight to Aksum (or Axum), the historical capital of Tigray, to track down any remnants of the Ethiopian Jews there. Aksum may not be such a major metropolis, but it played

a notable role in a region that was once home to Jews scattered throughout hundreds of villages. Although the area draws few Jewish tourists besides those with family roots, it's actually a popular tourist destination, as the city was the center of a significant empire for over 1,500 years.

Local tradition claims that the Aron Bris Hashem — the Ark of the Covenant, is housed in one of the churches in Aksum. According to legend, after the Queen of Sheba visited Shlomo HaMelech she had a son called Menelik I. He grew up in Ethiopia but later visited and lived with his father in Jerusalem. Upon returning home, the tradition goes, he brought the Aron with him and there it remains. We Jews, of course, believe that there is no truth to this myth, but couldn't resist driving by the church where this holy artifact supposedly remains. The “Ark” is supposedly kept in an armed building and guarded by one priest, although no one has ever seen it.

Thanks to Amram we were able to connect with a history professor at Aksum University who is especially interested in the legacy of the local Jews. Samuel Kidane was waiting for us when we landed, and even arranged for the university's 4x4 and driver. Off we went deep into the dry countryside, passing ancient monasteries and farmers working much like our forefathers did in biblical times. We noticed that they were performing the *dishah* (threshing grain) and *zoreh* (winnowing) just as it was done thousands of years ago. Wanting to understand these biblical activities better, we stopped to join a group of farmers in the field. First we participated in winnowing and slowly shook the grain into the wind. Lo and behold, the wind carried off the chaff. We then observed threshing of grain. This process of

## Buried in Africa

**1. ALL THAT'S LEFT** Relatives come back with candles to honor their loved ones

**2. DESERT SACRIFICES** Ari and Ari discovered the mountain behind the village of Bet Mariah, where an altar was once erected

**3. PROTECTING HIS PLOT** The last Jew of Beit Mariah returned from Israel in order not to lose his land

**4. GRAVE RESULTS** Relatives marked this tomb in blue, but not before a tree managed to grow out of the stone



loosening the edible part of the wheat from the chaff was done before winnowing by having the oxen walk in circles on the grain. The farmer pointed out to us that these animals had their mouths tied shut so they could not eat from the grain that they created. This, in fact, is exactly what the Torah forbids when it states “*lo sachsom shor b'disho* — do not muzzle an ox when it is threshing grain” (*Devarim 25:4*).

We continued west from Aksum toward villages that had once had sizable, vibrant Jewish communities. The area didn't look like the Ethiopia we knew; the landscape and fauna were so different from what we were used to in Gondar and in Addis Ababa. Even the animals were different. Here camels wandered the fields, something you don't see in the more southern regions.

Amram told us the legend of the origin of the Jews of Tigray. Many years ago, one of the leaders of the Beta Israel community had a dream that G-d would lead them back to Israel as He did at the time of the Exodus from Egypt. This man gathered a large following and attempted to reach Israel, but the plan failed and many died en route. The surviving remnant settled in Aksum and the surrounding villages. The exodus in the early '80s was far more successful and though many died on the way, thousands did make it to Israel.

During our ride we asked Samuel what the non-Jewish locals thought of that attempted mass exodus. The locals, he said, were afraid that the Jews might be secretly supporting one of the other militias. The TPLF called a three-day conference, demanding that the Jews explain why they were leaving. But the Jews insisted that there was no subterfuge, no treachery, simply a desire to return to the land from which their forefathers had been exiled.

**Grave Reality** Ultimately, we reached our destination of the once-vibrant Jewish community of Inda Aba Guna. The Ethiopian Jews had once been mocked by their neighbors for always washing themselves for Shabbos and in accordance with the laws of family purity. To accommodate this need, most Jewish villages were built near a river or lake, and this was true of

Inda Aba Guna as well. As we drove across a bumpy field, we saw a solitary wall in the distance, surrounding what was once the synagogue. The broken glass on the top of the wall was to prevent people from breaking in. We were quite surprised to see an old Magen David rusting over one of the windows, and upon entering the structure, we saw where the *aron kodesh* had been located within the shul. We looked across the valley and saw the village where Fereda had grown up, and on the way out we passed a bustling school. Samuel confirmed our hunch: what is now a government school had once been the Jewish ORT school that Fereda founded.

Samuel also took us to two Jewish cemeteries, far off the beaten path in hills deep inside the territory. Traditionally, the Jews here marked their graves with just a pile of stones and no headstone or memorial at all. Yet we noticed an interesting phenomenon. The relatives of these deceased have been coming back from Israel to visit their family plots, keep them up, and pray over them. Most remarkably, small *yahrtzeit* candles from Israel are found on many tombs in the cemetery. Near the front of the cemetery is a large monument topped with a huge Magen David (which they call “David's cross”). The local population asserts that for generations and until today, a tiger and serpent sleep on that spot and guard it, an indication of its significance as the burial site of Abba Tsegay, the first local religious leader.

On the way back, Samuel took us to another smaller cemetery that had all but disappeared, in the village of Slehleka. This town had been known as “the village of Beta Israel,” and had been a center of pottery, one of the crafts the Jews specialized in. Once we got to the main path of the village, Samuel scooped a local child off the street, took him in our jeep, and had him direct us in the direction of the cemetery. Then the driver and the child stayed behind as Samuel and the two of us headed toward the darkening horizon to find a few Jewish graves. It was soon pitch-dark, yet we traipsed down dirt alleys and into a field with hyenas baying in the distance to find a few isolated tombs.

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Samuel insisted that this had been a large burial ground, and due to the absence of Jews to maintain it, it shrinks every time he visits.

**The High Point** Not far from Inda Aba Guna is the village of Bet Mariah. As we entered, we were struck by the sight of a mountain seeming to pop up out of the flat plain adjacent to the village. When we arrived amid growling dogs and eager children, we too were excited, for we had been told that at the top of this mountain was a “Jewish *mizbei'ach*” (although private “*bamos*” were actually halachically prohibited). Neither Samuel nor Amram had ever been there; they were pretty sure no tourist had ever ventured up to see it. While the reed-thin Ethiopians nimbly hopped up the mountain, we limped and *krechtzed* our way up, gasping for air and chiding ourselves for being so out of shape. Only upon our return to Israel did we discover that it is well over a mile above sea level and called the “roof of Africa,” and thus the air is quite thin.

When we finally reached the site, panting, we found ourselves by a pile of stones, a *gal avanim*, which had been used as a prayer site. The jury was out on whether they actually did animal sacrifices there, but what we do know is that every Shabbos and on holidays Jews would make the trek up the mountain and offer their prayers to Hashem. As we stood looking down on small clusters of huts in the distance for miles around, we could imagine that for 2,500 years there was a vibrant Jewish presence in Ethiopia, and we pictured Jews streaming from the nearby villages to this mountain sanctuary.

**The Last Jew** After the mountain climb, a man in his 60s who recognized our yarmulkes came up to us, greeted us with “shalom” and began to speak in Hebrew. He is Jewish and had made aliyah with the rest of the Ethiopians years before, but didn’t want to lose his farmlands, so he returned to try to work them. He was sad, lonely, and a recent widower, and

had recently decided to return to Israel, as he was too old and tired to work the land alone.

We made our way back from the countryside to Aksum. Returning to our hotel, after having been up and moving for close to 48 hours, we were ready to hit the sack. Only then did our hosts tell us that a formal dinner had been arranged with the president of Aksum University, which has 10,000 students, to see how we could “collaborate” in the future. We realized then, that they thought we had come as part of an Israeli university research project.

How disappointing. First we had to explain that we could only eat the canned tuna fish and crackers that we had brought — and not partake of the fried chicken and soup on the menu. And rather than dash their hopes of collaboration, we explained, to their delight, that in *addition* to being involved in university research, we were also writers for an important Jewish periodical called *Mishpacha* magazine, and that they would get great exposure. In the end the university president didn’t show up, but in truth we did discuss ideas for collaboration.

Erev Shabbos we flew back to Addis early in the morning. There, in the backyard of what for close to a century had been the local *shlacht hoiz*, we *shechted* 150 chickens and three sheep for our friend and host Menashe and his extended family. The koshering took almost until Shabbos, so we zoomed back to his house, finished up some cooking and then got ready for a relaxing Shabbos with a fascinating Friday night meal.

Among the guests were Israeli ambassador Belaynesh Zevadia and her husband, whom we had contacted and asked to join us. She is the first Ethiopian-Israeli to be appointed as an ambassador. And there was an additional gain for our new friend, the professor from Aksum University. We made a *shidduch* between the ambassador and Samuel, and they are now in professional contact.

So in the end, everyone benefited, but the luckiest of the lot was us, having the opportunity to see up close the remains of an ancient community, yet being privileged to live in an era, and in the Land, where we’ve witnessed the ingathering of the furthest-flung of the exiles. ●