

Ethiopian jews - Minority Rights Group

Profile

Ethiopian Israelis, also known as Beta Israel, have been settling in the country for over three decades, with around a third of the approximately 140,000 community members born in Israel, yet they continue to experience acute discrimination on the margins of society.

History

Though the origins of Ethiopia's Jewish community are uncertain, their presence has been traced back more than 2,000 years to the Jewish migration from Egypt. Following the adoption of Christianity by King Ezana of Axum, in what is now northern Ethiopia and Eritrea, a separate Jewish state was formed that over the ensuing centuries experienced regular confrontations with successive Christian empires. Nevertheless, despite fluctuating power balances in the region, Ethiopia's Jews remained in the area until increasing political instability and fears of persecution in the latter part of the twentieth century saw successive waves of emigration in the late 1970s and 1980s. The formal recognition of Ethiopian Jews by the Sephardic Chief Rabbi in 1973 paved the way for the arrivals of some 40,000 Ethiopians by the end of the 1980s.

The experience of immigration led to significant social change within the Ethiopian Jewish community, with traditionally defined gender roles for women and men: women were regarded as responsible for the household work while men remained the main decision makers in the family. These roles changed after their arrival in Israel. A related issue is the transformation that the traditional Ethiopian family unit since immigration, with children better placed to integrate and learn the language, while some older members of the community struggled to integrate. Inevitably this is linked to other problems and has contributed to a growing identity issue, especially among teens, who despite being born and raised in Israel are still confronted with racism and discrimination.

Current issues

Ethiopian Israelis remain one of the country's most marginalized communities. The figures speak for themselves: previous analysis of 2008–9 government data by the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute showed that poverty levels among Ethiopian Israelis were 41 per cent, compared to 15 per cent among the general Jewish population.

Some civil society organizations argue that this situation is the direct result of discriminatory government policies. For instance, programmes implemented by the Ministry of Aliyah and Immigrant Absorption have tended to relegate the Ethiopian community to poorer neighbourhoods and continued to treat all of them as immigrants, despite the fact that 70 per cent of the community are no longer 'new immigrants', according to the normal definition of the term by the State of Israel. According to Fidel, the Association for Education and Social Integration of Ethiopian

Jews in Israel, the term reflects the continued segregation of the Ethiopian minority, despite the fact that the majority have been resident in the country for more than 30 years.

It is hoped that better access to education could support a broader transformation of the community situation in other areas, such as employment. Though there have been some improvements over the years, the position of Ethiopian Israelis in the labour market remains significantly worse than that of the general Jewish population. For example, though a 2005 amendment to the 1959 Public Service Law stipulated that Ethiopian Israelis should be adequately represented at all levels of public office, the proportion remains disproportionately low. More generally, sizeable gaps in wages and professional occupations persist.

Nevertheless, in recent years there have been some sign of progress, including the election to Israel's parliament, the Knesset, in 2013 of Pnina Tamano-Shata – the first female Ethiopian-Israeli to win a seat – although she subsequently lost it in the 2015 election when her party won fewer seats. The community has also achieved greater visibility within Israel's popular culture, with Yityish Aynaw becoming the first woman of African descent to be crowned Miss Israel in February 2013. These are small but important steps towards greater inclusion and visibility for the Ethiopian-Israeli community.

Ethiopian Israelis' frustration at the inequalities they face came to a head following the beating of an Ethiopian Israeli soldier by two police officers in 2015. Thousands gathered at a rally in Tel Aviv; the demonstration began peacefully but ended in clashes between protestors and police when some of the demonstrators tried to enter the city's municipality building. At least 46 marchers and police were injured in the violence.