Beta Israel

Profile

Beta Israel are known as Ethiopian Jews, and until recently by the derogatory name Falasha (meaning stranger or exile in Ge’ez). The Beta Israel perceive themselves to be Jewish, living a traditional form of life evolving from at least the fourteenth century, although some suggest that their origins are more ancient. Their ancestors were deprived of the right to hold land as a result of the north-west expansion of the core Abyssinian state. Beta Israel consider contact with Christians to be ritually impure, and this reinforced the self-identity of Beta Israel and allowed them to continue their religious and social life in the face of pressure to convert, while being excluded from positions of authority within the state. Their basic tenets are those of Judaism.

Historical context

At their peak in the seventeenth century there were over 1 million Beta Israel. Before mass migration to Israel in the 1980s they numbered approximately 30,000 and lived in Gondar province and the Simien Mountains in northern Ethiopia.

Most Ethiopian Jews lived in small rural communities in Gondar and Tigray provinces, where they suffered from prejudice at the hands of neighbouring peoples. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church opposed the development of Jewish schools. After the Second World War, they continued to face discrimination and suffer evictions, extortionate taxes and rents, and attacks on cemeteries. After the revolution of 1974, in theory the position of Beta Israel was improving because of the land reform. But Jews were often given inferior land and their freedom to travel was restricted.

Beta Israel had much to gain from the land reforms and were made the target of the counter-revolutionary Ethiopian Democratic Union, composed of the old nobility and landlords in Gondar. During 1977-9 they were forced to flee remote villages and move to areas of greater concentration. They were also attacked by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party for alleged Zionist tendencies. Substantial numbers of Jews were among the thousands tortured, imprisoned and massacred in the 1978 ‘Red Terror’ campaigns waged by the Dergue. In March 1984, at the height of the famine in northern Ethiopia, thousands of Beta Israel began to move to Sudan by foot. Several thousand lost their lives in transit, children were orphaned and separated from their parents, and disease and malnutrition were rife in the refugee camps. At the end of 1984 Operation Moses brought around 15,000 to Israel, followed in 1991 by 20,000 more in Operation Solomon. Israel believed it had brought all Beta Israel out of Ethiopia, but two groups remained: Jews from Quara and the Falasha Mura, who had partially adopted Christianity before returning to pure Judaism. Many Falasha Mura travelled to Addis Ababa, expecting to be included in the 1991 airlift, but were not recognized as Jews by Israel. They remained in their capital, separated from their land, and many from family members who had already made it to Israel. Israel disputed their identities as Jews until a 1993 ruling by a rabbinical court, but since then the Falasha Mura have only succeeded in piecemeal emigration. In 1999, another Israeli airlift took a further 3,800 Beta Israel, many of them Jews from Quara, from Ethiopia to Israel, but many Falasha Mura
remained behind.

**Current issues**

According to a Reuters news agency chronology (March 2007), in September 2005, following a protest by Falasha Mura about delays in their promised transfer to Israel, Ethiopia agreed to allow 600 people to leave for Israel each month. The Jewish Agency - an organization committed to resettlement - has said that by the end of 2008 some 6,300 people are due to immigrate to Israel.