Survival Narratives of Ethiopian Jewish Mothers and Daughters

BY RUBY K. NEWMAN

L'auteure raconte ce qu'ont vécu les mères juives et leurs filles qui ont quitté l'Éthiopie pour Israël et elle assure que les histoires d'exil et de survivance qu'elles ont partagées continuent de renforcer les liens mères-filles.

> The Mother: "I love to sit and listen to stories from Ethiopia.... I won't forget."
>
> The Daughter: "It's forbidden to forget."

There are about 60,000 Ethiopian Jews living in Israel today, many of whom emigrated in two government-sponsored rescue missions. The first of these, Operation Moses, in 1984–85, secretly brought 6,500 Jews who had fled from Ethiopia to Sudan. The second, Operation Solomon, in 1991, airlifted 14,000 Ethiopian Jews from Addis Ababa to Israel in a span of 36 hours. In the summer of 1997 I interviewed nine pairs of Ethiopian Jewish mothers and daughters in Israel. Their community, called *Beta Israel,* traces its history back to the liaison between the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon or perhaps to the lost tribe of Dan.[1] Because of their isolation from the other Jewish communities around the world they have retained a Jewish heritage similar to biblical Judaism but which is also informed by the African milieu. The stories of mothers (aged 38–75) and daughters (aged 20–32) reflect the construction of their identities as women and as Jews and demonstrate women's strength and survival skills. As women refugees fleeing war, famine, and religious oppression, they relate tales of resistance and survival against harrowing circumstances and conditions. The daughters' repeated enjoinders that their mothers' heroism be transmitted, recorded, and passed on to succeeding generations speaks to the mother-daughter bond and to the ways in which that bond continues to empower both mothers and daughters as they share their stories and pass them on. The younger women view their mothers, and speak of them, not as victims or refugees but as agents of their own survival and of the survival of their children, both in terms of their flight out of Africa and their adaptation to Israeli society.[2]

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Mothers and daughters recounted tales of treks through desert and forest, detailing events such as crossing treacherous mountain roads, confronting bandits, and surviving the theft of their provisions.

> *They put us on donkeys, horses, and we just left and I remember that the whole time we were [travelling] at night, at night, at night, and not in the daytime. We didn't walk during the day; if it was daytime we would sleep, and I always asked: why is it like this? And they explained to us, they [her parents] explained to us, they themselves also were afraid, would we arrive or not, will they kill us or won't they? We suffered from that dilemma. After a few months, on the road, I almost died of thirst; a person who needs water and doesn't have it, is almost dead. And Mother was pregnant. My brother was a baby. I was six, he was four, one child two years old, and one in her stomach. The road itself, because there wasn't water, the road was parched. There were cracks. And often the horse fell and there are women that almost died in childbirth. Oh, what she went through.* (Limor)

They also described the anti-Semitism they encountered once they reached Sudan, where they had to hide the fact that they were Jews by pretending to eat unkosher food, lest they be murdered because of their religion. Girls and women were vulnerable to rape and pregnant women suffered the effects of the trek including having to give birth under difficult circumstances. Several informants left Ethiopia eight months pregnant, with babies on their backs and one or more children by their side. A few of the women delivered their babies during the journey or in refugee camps in Sudan. In Ethiopia babies are often delivered by a woman's mother and this pattern continued for some of the more fortunate women. "We got by. There was Mother. Mother manages like a doctor. Fantastic. They manage, they manage everything, like a doctor" (Sarah). Daughters who were separated from their mothers, however, felt bereft. A woman who delivered

her child in an Israeli hospital while her mother was being held in a Sudanese jail described how isolated she felt.

> *He was born in the hospital in Afula.... I wasn't used to giving birth in a hospital. They put me there, without parents. After five minutes, I'm screaming, screaming. I didn't talk to them. I was in a bed with a curtain, it was a big room. They came and asked me questions and I didn't know what to tell them. I didn't know what to tell them. I didn't know the language or anything. I only knew how to scream. Yes. Afterwards I gave birth and that's it.* (Leah).

When her mother was liberated from jail and the family was reunited the process of acculturation began mainly for the younger members of the family; the grandmother remained the repository of Ethiopian traditions and was tapped for her stories and memories by her granddaughters. The older generation has maintained the language, food, and the crafts of Ethiopia while their daughters and granddaughters have become more integrated into Israeli society.

Although Ethiopian Jews dreamed of reaching the promised land, life in Israel has brought new problems: Ethiopian Jews in Israel today are a visible minority and a group on the margins. Most of them began their lives in rural African villages (some were from larger towns or from Addis Ababa) and as immigrants to an industrialized society they continue to encounter difficult challenges. Many of the mother-daughter dyads reflected upon the ways in which the mothers continue to promote their children's well-being and success in Israel despite their own limited education and financial means. Most of the mothers arrived in Israel illiterate and have learned Hebrew, acquired literacy skills, and are working in their communities as teachers, child care workers, and community organizers. They articulate the importance of work and economic independence and their daughters show great pride in their mothers' workplace successes. Stories of extraordinary courage on the journey were complemented by stories of Ethiopian mothers in Israel helping their children to level the playing field when dealing with native-born Israelis. They accomplished this through a variety of strategies ranging from working overtime to pay for tutors and after-school programs for younger children to looking after their grandchildren so that their older sons or daughters could save money to buy their own homes. These practical matters are reinforced by the family stories that contribute to the mother and daughters' sense of empowerment. Most of the older women reached maturity in rural, pre-industrialized villages; their adaptation to the technological world of contemporary Israel as well as to a white-dominated society make their transition a complicated one. The mothers' stories were valued by their daughters as important shapers of their own identities as Black, Jewish women living in Israel and as an affirmation of empowerment through the motherline. They also reflect how the daughters look to their mothers to corroborate their memories of Africa as they define themselves as Black Jewish women in Israel: "I'm 24 and I feel as if, all the time, I'm searching into the past" (Limor). Stories from the motherline offer her a key to that past, which is dramatically different than her present life as a university student. In Ethiopia mothers and daughters followed a traditional trajectory. "My mother was a homemaker; my father worked the land," was the formulaic opening to several life histories. By the age of four or five girls assumed substantial household responsibilities: cooking, cleaning, and looking after younger children, while boys went out into the fields to help their fathers. Women received little or no education and married very early; marriages were arranged by the parents and the girls did not meet their husbands until their wedding day. One woman who was married at the age of nine has never forgiven her mother. She is now in her mid-20s and lives with her husband and four children; she regrets her lack of education and of opportunities to develop herself. Most women, however, married between the ages of 12 and 16; some who were motherless, married later and considered this an example of their bad "luck." "I was small. My mother died when I was small. I missed my mother" (Likenesh). Her daughter interjected,

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> *All day long she longed for her mother. Because she had no mother, no money, who would help her? In Ethiopia it's hard to marry without a mother. Who will prepare food? A lot of things have to be done before a marriage. If there's no mother, who would prepare food for them?* (Workenesh)

Motherless girls spent their youths caring for their fathers and younger siblings or simply had no one to look after their best interest: the need for a young woman to find a suitable match. The women who married in their early teens reflected on how difficult it was to be separated from their mothers. Furthermore, marriage put an end to schooling and to aspirations to higher education. One woman described how desperately she wanted to remain unmarried and go to school. She ran away from home

at the age of 12 when she discovered that her parents intended to finalize her engagement. They relented and sent her and her two sisters to school. Today they speak proudly of their daughter who is in university. Another young woman described an anti-Semitic incident that occurred when she was in Grade 2. She was attending a Jewish school where she was studying Hebrew.

> *At first we studied Hebrew, and then they burned the books.... I was in Grade 2. Two. I didn't understand. I thought they burned them because they were old. I took the books to burn them. I thought it was, like, old. Because if it was old, they don't just throw it away, to make things dirty, because in Ethiopia everything is natural and clean. No, there isn't, like, there isn't garbage, there isn't what to throw out; there is no packaging, so if there is garbage they burn it. I thought it was an old book. I took one to throw. Everyone took, so I took, too, but later I understood that it was Hebrew and they wouldn't let us keep it.* (Orit)

In spite of the anti-Semitism she encountered, her mother encouraged her to continue her studies and did not force her to marry at a young age. Her mother is eager for her to complete her university degree before marrying. "She'll study, she'll study, she'll travel. Here, without a profession it's a bit difficult. A profession. She will finish her degree. It'll be good" (Malka).

This sentiment was echoed by all the mothers I interviewed. One woman asserted repeatedly that she would love to be a grandmother,

> *I'm dying, I'm dying, I'm dying for grandchildren. I'm dying for her to marry. Dying for her to marry but she doesn't want to. [she laughs] I'm dying. I'm dying, but it isn't working; she wants to study. She says it's not Ethiopia, we're not in Ethiopia, Mother, Ethiopia is left behind she says.* (Sarah)

She is prepared to wait for her daughter to complete her education before she starts a family. The cohort of young women who came to Israel as small children and are now in their twenties have more access to education than do those who married young in Ethiopia and who, now in their mid- to late-twenties, are raising large families. Many of these women voiced their frustration and bitterness at the limitations that they are facing. They hope for greater opportunities for their children but they themselves are trapped; they are still in their twenties yet they know that the prospect of further education is sadly out of reach. They are caught between two worlds.

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The stresses in Ethiopia were different from those encountered today in Israel; although the community remained separate from its Christian and Muslim neighbors in terms of religious practice, there was some symbiosis. Ethiopian Jews adhered to the Hebrew Bible but were also influenced by the surrounding culture. Female genital surgery was practiced by *Beta Israel* in Africa but has no basis in Jewish law or tradition. Although there is documentation of this practice in the medical literature, most of the older women were unwilling to discuss the topic, most likely because it was not consistent with Jewish practice in Israel. The medical data suggest that up to 30 per cent of Ethiopian Jewish women had undergone some form of genital surgery. When the Ethiopian community, which had maintained strict observance of Jewish laws as set out in the Hebrew Bible, reached Israel, they were eager to embrace normative Jewish practices and quickly abandoned female genital mutilation (Grisaru). Many of the women do not acknowledge that the practice was ever followed by Jewish women. One young woman, however, said that, although there were very few cases of genital mutilation in the village where she was born, she had heard that it reduced a woman's sexual desire: "I heard that they say that, I don't know, that she won't run after boys ... they say, like, her desire is reduced" (Orit).

While female genital mutilation is an example of an African practice followed by the *Beta Israel*, the biblical laws of *taharat ha-mishpakha* (family purity) which were strictly followed by Ethiopian women come directly from the Hebrew Bible, and many women voiced regret over the fact that it is difficult to observe them in Israel. At the onset of their menstrual period they left their houses for a communal menstrual hut separated from their homes by distance and by a ring of stones. They remained there for seven days or longer if bleeding continued, returning home only after submerging themselves in running water, such as a river or a stream, waiting until there were three stars in the sky and then re-entering their homes. After the birth of a daughter the women remained in the menstrual hut for eighty days; after the birth of a son, however, only forty days were required. When I queried the women about the reasons for this discrepancy one woman replied: "boys are cleaner" while another answered "daughters are valuable; to mothers, daughters are valuable" (i.e. special, of great value). I might note that this woman has six sons and one daughter. Another response came from a woman who has several daughters as well as several sons and who focused not on the different lengths of time determined by the sex of the child but

on the experience of the hut itself: "it's fun for the woman who gave birth; she is pampered." She is not permitted to work, and food is brought to her by family and neighbors. The community looks after her other children during this time. The description of the menstrual huts led to many animated discussions about the week out of each month spent in the company of women and the pleasure they derived from it. The women all described the menstrual hut as a positive part of their experience as Jewish women in Ethiopia and several older women were saddened by the difficulty of maintaining the laws of family purity strictly now that they are living in Israel. They sighed and said "what can you do?" The daughters, however, occasionally express mixed feelings about their mothers' seclusion for a week out of each month. Some daughters regard the huts nostalgically, recalling how, when they were little, they would sneak into the menstrual hut to be with their mothers or grandmothers. Others, however, remember how much harder they had to work in the home during those periods, cooking, cleaning, and looking after other family members.

Although the mothers now recognize these laws to have been a factor in the subordination of women, when they observed them they served to maintain distinctions between them and the surrounding gentile culture. Many mothers and daughters discussed the inferior status of women in Ethiopia and the more egalitarian ethos of life in Israel (often honoured more in the breach); they conceptualized laws of family purity, however, as Jewish practice that follows biblical injunctions and maintains their distinctness as a community. Laws of family purity as a form of religious identification while living among other peoples has recently been explored by Charlotta Fonrobert. Fonrobert notes that

> the laws of *taharat ha'mishpakha* (family purity) may have been perpetuated by women who valued both the seclusion mandated by the rabbinic laws and the religious identification with Judaism that it provided them when they lived among other peoples. (6)

Virtually all my informants echoed Fonrobert's observation that the laws of family purity were a substantive part of their Jewish female identity. One 22-year-old woman suggested that this may be one of the reasons for the high divorce rate in Israel: the purity laws are not followed as they were in the Ethiopian villages. Her interpretation, however, was coloured by her education in a religious school where the rabbis are eager to blame the high divorce rate on lapses in adherence to family purity rather than the challenges to patriarchy levelled by the women's ability to earn their own income and the proliferation of shelters for battered women in Israel and their empowerment, therefore, to leave abusive marriages.

Wife abuse is a serious problem within the community. In Ethiopia, when women were abused and ran away from their husbands, they returned to their parents' home. Their families or a respected member of the community would try to make peace and the woman would be sent back, often to be abused further. In Israel, however, there is a significant percentage of single parent families—figures of 30 per cent have been quoted (see Westheimer and Kaplan). This could reflect the fact that women are now leaving abusive marriages. Opportunities for financial independence through work or through a national welfare system make it possible for them to escape domestic violence.

Domestic violence is a serious and growing problem in the Ethiopian community in Israel. Ethiopian women, who dreamed of reaching "Jerusalem" continue to suffer oppression both within the family and outside it. They need to acquire literacy, learn a new language, obtain job skills, and adapt to a society that welcomed them warmly but to whom they are often invisible and discriminated against because they are women, immigrants, and Blacks. They have had to negotiate the Israeli educational system in order to ensure their children's success in schools where "an estimated 1,800 Ethiopian teens—about 15 per cent of their age group—have dropped out of school and are wandering the streets" (*The Jerusalem Post*). Education is seen by grassroots organizations as the key to the empowerment of the community. When I asked one woman what she thinks the future holds for her daughters, she replied, " If it's good for me, it will also be good for them. It's good for me that they get ahead as much as possible," and to that end she began working outside the home to pay for school outings, after-school programs, and tutoring when necessary.

> *I do everything, thank God, I do everything and with God's help they'll complete their studies. If she [her daughter] wants a profession she will study and it will be good. If it's good for me I'm sure it will be good for her.* (Sarah)

Her daughter speaks with pride of her mother's strength in leading her family to Israel, in learning Hebrew, and in holding a job for which she is highly respected. The daughter's determination that "it's forbidden to forget" her mother and grandmother's stories of life in Ethiopia and their journey to the land of Israel, sustains and grounds her as she proceeds on her own journey.

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[1]In 1973 the Chief Rabbi of Israel declared the *Beta Israel* to be descendants of the lost tribe of Dan.

[2]I am indebted to Helene Moussa's insightful analysis of Ethiopian and

Eritrean women refugees as "victimized rather than as victims, and as active shapers of their personal and collective lives" (16).

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BERYL BAIGENT

Scorpio Swinging, After the Painting by Jean-Honore Fragonard (c. 1768)

for Nicola

Moving to greater heights
and knowing the thrill as you return
to the faithful earth once more,
whether it is the jump from a bridge
with a bungie rope around your ankle
or a gliding leap on a ski slope—this
is your impression on how life should be.

And now I think it all began
with nothing more than the pendulum
rise and fall of the garden swing
as you cherished the idyllic breeze
on your face kicked off your sandals
and reached out with your toes
to rival the on-coming air.

The sky at your back was sombre but you
were bathed in a sunlit-shaft. Behind you
the past and a guardian figure holding
the ropes striving to limit the heights
you knew you could attain. And beneath
the provocative rustle of petticoat
and branches the waiting world adored you.

Beryl Baigent dedicates her poetry to her three daughters: Amanda (Mandy), Nicola (Nicki), and Krista. Many of Beryl's poems reflect her Celtic background.