

JEWISH MUSICAL

**MODERNISM,
Old and New**

EDITED BY PHILIP V. BOHLMAN

WITH A FOREWORD BY SANDER L. GILMAN

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS :: CHICAGO AND LONDON

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The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637
The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London
© 2008 by The University of Chicago
All rights reserved. Published 2008
Printed in China

17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 1 2 3 4 5

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-06326-3 (cloth)
ISBN-10: 0-226-06326-7 (cloth)

Publication of this book and the accompanying CD has been generously supported by a subvention from Carol Honigberg and Joel Honigberg.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jewish musical modernism, old and new / edited by Philip V. Bohlman with a foreword by Sander L. Gilman.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-06326-3 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-226-06326-7 (cloth : alk. paper) 1. Jews—Music—History and criticism. 2. Modernism (Music) 3. Jewish musicians. 4. Music—20th century—History and criticism. I. Bohlman, Philip Vilas.

ML3776.J42 2008
780.89'924—dc22

2007045221

© The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

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Echoes from beyond Europe

Music and the Beta Israel Transformation

... KAY KAUFMAN SHELEMAY

Among the more obscure convergences of European and Jewish history is one that occurred mainly outside Europe, in Ethiopia: that of Europeans with the Ethiopian people historically called Beta Israel or Falasha, today known as the Ethiopian Jews in Israel.¹ In this essay I will trace the historical process that culminated in 1991 with what might be termed the end of Falasha/Beta Israel history in Ethiopia and the final transplantation of the Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel. Central to this process was the transformation of Beta Israel ritual life and practice to fit European Jewish models, one that can be traced through its musical content.

How to tell this tale, in fact, presents a central challenge, as we are soberly reminded by the encounters of the Europeans with peoples of the New World. These encounters are recalled by

Europeans within narratives of discovery and by New World peoples as tales of conquest (Robertson 1992: 9). I have chosen here to use the metaphor of *midrash* (literally, interpretation of scriptural meaning) because it provides a flexible, multivocal framework for an explanatory process. The choice of *midrash*, too, locates this discussion of encounter within an explicitly Judaic framework, resonant with present-day Beta Israel and Jewish history.

According to Jacob Neusner, there are three types of *midrash*. The first entails taking a series of individual verses and linking the sequence in which they appear as the organizing principle of a "sustained discourse." The second employs the reading of individual verses to test and validate a larger-scale proposition. The third type of *midrash* directs attention not to the concrete statements,

but to the larger narrative of which they are part, recasting a story "in such a way as to make new and urgent points through the retelling" (Neusner 1993: 54).

My *midrash* partakes of all three types of interpretation, although scriptural text plays only a small role in the interaction of belief, music, and history traced here. I construct my narrative by linking a series of events over large spans of time and space. Each link gives rise to new liturgical and musical discourses. I hope that the telling of this story will highlight the relation of the Beta Israel with modern Europe, a little-discussed aspect of Beta Israel history that had a transformative impact on a people, their religious traditions, their history, and, of course, their music.

This case study intersects with but does not duplicate other narratives of Jewish modernity. It is a much longer story, commencing well before the emergence of European modernism and continuing long after the cataclysm of the Holocaust stilled the voices of so many European Jews. It moves beyond the local, traveling back and forth across geographical space, encompassing both first contact and continued interaction, which were born not of serendipity or happenstance, but of purposeful union. Finally, in contrast to many other local modernities, played out in increasingly secular contexts, the story of the Beta Israel remains throughout firmly anchored in the realm of the sacred.

The essay is divided into four sections. I first move backward in time to situate the broader historical setting and the Beta Israel past in Ethiopia

that led to the encounters with Europe, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. The second section, commencing about 1855 or 1860, will explore how Europe came to Ethiopia, and the Beta Israel to Europe. The third part picks up the narrative post-1950, observing the indirect yet substantial impact of the Holocaust on the Beta Israel. The final section, starting in 1991, will arrive at the end of Beta Israel history and the birth of the Ethiopian Jews. Throughout the essay, musical fragments anchor and exemplify each historical moment.

The Beta Israel within Ethiopian History

It is difficult to separate the telling of Beta Israel history from the battles that have been fought over its interpretation in scholarship and the broader world of religious politics.² I begin with the centrality of the Five Books of Moses in its Ethiopic translation, the *Orit*, because most perceptions of Beta Israel history from both within and without are grounded in it.

At the center of Beta Israel notions of their own past is a myth or "myth-legend" (Abbink 1990) with biblical roots: the story of the visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon, sketched in 1 Kings 10:1–13 and 2 Chronicles 9:1–12. In brief, the biblical story tells of the Queen of Sheba, who having heard of the fame of Solomon, comes to test him with riddles, bearing gifts of spices, gold, and precious stones. The encounter ends with the king giving to the queen "everything she wanted and asked for, in addition to what King Solomon

gave her out of his royal bounty. Then she and her attendants left and returned to her own land" (*JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* 1999: 737).

This tale of encounter is a deep aspect of the Ethiopian worldview and was recorded and elaborated in the thirteenth century (although it may have had earlier roots) in a document known as the *Kebrā Nagast* (The Glory of the Kings). The *Kebrā Nagast* recounts the visit of the queen of Ethiopia (Makeda) to King Solomon; the birth of their son, Menelik, after the queen's return to Ethiopia; Menelik's visit years later to his father; and Menelik's return with the ark of the covenant to Ethiopia. This tale became the Ethiopian national epic and legitimized the overthrow of one Christian dynasty by another in 1270, which subsequently became known as the "Solomonic" dynasty (Levine 1973). The *Kebrā Negast* has also served to legitimize the "Israelite lineage" of Christian Ethiopian kings, providing "a founding myth" for the royal house and its people (Abbink 1990: 405-6). Understood both as "real history and eternal truth" (*ibid.*: 407), this tale provides an origin myth for both Christian Ethiopians and for the Beta Israel (*ibid.*: 411). The Beta Israel also recount this narrative, elaborating the story to describe Menelik's return to Ethiopia, accompanied by learned men and priests who are said to have joined with the Beta Israel (Asres Yayeh 1995: 120-21).

We will return to discussion of the *Kebrā Negast* below, but it is important here to emphasize that this narrative at once links the Beta Israel with Christian Ethiopia and with Jewish sources.

In this same manner, the *Orit* has provided a central source for Beta Israel and Christian Ethiopian religious practice and identity throughout their shared history. Modernism is perceived as a secularizing force, yet this tale plays out almost exclusively within a religious domain (Crummey 2000). Thus, the *Orit* both lent legitimacy to the Solomonic dynasty through its claims of Judaic ancestry and provided a core of observances for Ethiopian Christians and Jews alike (including such traditions as the Saturday Sabbath, animal sacrifice, and circumcision). The legend also became the basis for the Beta Israel's twentieth-century claim to Jewish identity. Because Beta Israel religious practice and liturgy lack so many important Jewish elements and because the Beta Israel had no knowledge of post-biblical Jewish writings and practices, their adherence to biblical customs and perpetuation of a history with biblical ties became a central element in discussions of their identity by outsiders as well.

The importance of the *Orit* to Beta Israel worship has since the late nineteenth century been emphasized in writings ranging from the scholarly to the popular. Some emphasize the "fanatical" adherence of the Beta Israel to the teachings of the Torah to counterbalance the absence of Talmudic sources among them ("Jews of Ethiopia" 1972). Beta Israel biblical practices were also frequently credited with defining Beta Israel consciousness as a community and with having buttressed the Beta Israel's will to survive over the centuries despite their marginality as a minority religious community and low-status metalworkers and

potters within Ethiopia (Messing 1982: 24). The importance of the *Orit* in Beta Israel practice, especially when wedded to widely circulated medieval legends in Europe connecting them with the lost tribe of Dan (Kaplan 1992: 24–26), further provided a basis for their recognition, after long debate, as Jews. In 1975 they were acknowledged as a “lost tribe” and granted automatic citizenship in Israel under the 1950 Law of Return (Rapoport and Siegel 1975).

Musical Interlude I: Monastic Voices

In striking contrast to the emphasis on the *Orit* within Beta Israel belief and legend, as well as its frequent mention by outsiders as the hallmark of Beta Israel religious practice, there is no regular, cyclical reading of biblical portions within the Beta Israel liturgy. Here we find a major difference between Beta Israel liturgical and musical practice and that of other Jews, who from an early date chanted portions from the Five Books of Moses as part of their weekly observances.

Before the encounter with Europeans, the prayers of the Beta Israel liturgy drew on quotations from the book of Psalms and other biblical texts, along with segments from Beta Israel literature. Although most of the Beta Israel liturgy is in the Ge'ez language (classical Ethiopic), some texts were set in an Ethiopian vernacular (Agawinña) that the Beta Israel once spoke. The structural core of the Beta Israel liturgy is also strikingly different from that of other Jewish traditions: it is a monastic office, said to be conveyed to the Beta Israel by Ethiopian Christian monks who joined

their community beginning in the fifteenth century (Shelemay 1989).

These same monks are also credited with bringing the *Orit* to the Beta Israel, introducing laws of monastic purity, building the Falasha prayer house, and organizing their liturgical cycle. In short, Ethiopian Christian monks were said to have introduced virtually all surviving Beta Israel religious practices. Although I cannot delve here into the complex history of Beta Israel monasticism and its heavily Judaized Ethiopian Christian sources during the fifteenth century, it is important to note that religious authority, as well as transmission of ritual orders among the Beta Israel, was held until the twentieth century by the Beta Israel's own revered monks, who trained priests and liturgical musicians within the Beta Israel religious community. To explore one of the monastic prayers that constituted the Beta Israel liturgy until the departure from Ethiopia opens a window on a musical and liturgical tradition that pre-dated Beta Israel contact with Europe.

We can take as an example the monastic prayer *Kalhu Kwellu Mala'ekt*, chanted during the Beta Israel morning liturgy before dawn (see fig. 4.1). This text, possibly of Syriac origin, is shared with the Ethiopian Christian liturgy (Shelemay 1989: 115). The division of the topography of heaven into seven layers is thought to draw on the Ascension of Isaiah (ibid.: 133 n. 54). The gong (*qachel*) ostinato accompanying the prayer and the alternation between soloist and chorus are typical of performance practice in much of the traditional Beta Israel liturgy.

Both Beta Israel oral traditions and Ethiopian written sources trace the arrival of monasticism—along with monastic prayers—to the Beta Israel during the fifteenth century. Before that time, we find only scattered written references to rebels and Judaized monastic groups (both called *ayhud*, literally “Jew”) who left the church, moved to outlying areas, and founded monasteries among peoples not under church control (Kaplan 1992). Musical and textual evidence from the Falasha liturgy (see Shelemay 1989), historical research by Kaplan (1992) and James Quirin (1992), and anthropological inquiry by Jon Abbink (1984, 1990) all point to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as the critical period for the religious and political genesis of the Ethiopian community that came to be known as the Beta Israel or Falasha. Following their loss of land during the rule of Emperor Yeshaq (1413–30), we can trace from the sixteenth century forward the first references in the Ethiopian chronicles to the Falasha. Lacking land rights, they soon began working as smiths and potters (Quirin 1992: 62–65), occupations that sustained them until their departure from Ethiopia.

Europe comes to the Beta Israel—and the Beta Israel to Europe

Only in the mid-nineteenth century did Europe come to the Beta Israel. The Jesuits were present in Ethiopia from 1555 to 1633, but they did not directly affect the Beta Israel; it was the arrival of the Christian missionaries in northern Ethiopia in the nineteenth century that opened

a new chapter in Ethiopian and Beta Israel history. These Christian missionaries first sought to transform Beta Israel tradition according to Western Christian models. The first, in 1830, was the Church Missionary Society agent Samuel Gobat, a graduate of the Basel Mission training school who was ordained in London (Crummey 1972: 29–31). Several missionaries followed, including Martin Flad, who entered Ethiopia in 1855 and founded a mission in Gondar, the provincial capital, located near a large concentration of Beta Israel (*ibid.*: 117–18). Closely associated with Flad was Henry Aaron Stern, a German Jew who had converted and been ordained as an Anglican. Representing the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews, Stern arrived in Ethiopia in early 1860 (*ibid.*: 128–29). The rule of the Ethiopian Emperor Tewodros (1855–1868), which saw the weakening of central Ethiopian political power as well as economic hardships, permitted the proliferation of these missions in Ethiopia.

Although the presence of European missions in Ethiopia grew in part out of the same colonial sentiments that catalyzed European involvement in much of the rest of Africa during the second half of the nineteenth century, a special situation pertained in Ethiopia. Because Ethiopia already had an ancient and indigenous Ethiopian Orthodox Christian church (founded in the fourth century), the missionaries were allowed to proselytize only among non-Christians in Ethiopia, with any converts to be directed into the Ethiopian church (Kaplan 1992: 118). Thus, many of the missionaries' efforts were directed toward

the Beta Israel and other Ethiopian minorities. Research has shown that the impact of the European missions on the Beta Israel was slight (Crummey 1972: 146). Indeed, the proselytizing sparked a religious revival among the Beta Israel, and one religious dispute with the missionaries was even mediated by Emperor Tewodros himself in 1862. In the end, the missionaries offended the emperor and had to be liberated by a British military expedition in 1868 (Kaplan 1992: 119). From then up to the first decades of the twentieth century, the European Protestant missions in Ethiopia were managed by native agents, with only occasional visits from foreign missionaries.

If the Christian missions did not serve to convert a great number of Falasha, it is clear that many Beta Israel joined the Ethiopian Orthodox Church on their own for economic and social reasons. But perhaps the greatest impact of the missions was their success in undermining the authority of the Falasha monks, who had for centuries been the religious leaders of their community:

Stern and his colleagues not only attacked the priesthood and monasticism as institutions, but also exploited every opportunity to engage individual clerics in disputations in order to demonstrate their opponents' ignorance. Their task was not a difficult one. The Beta Israel monks were honored in their community because of their piety and the communal and ritual roles they filled, not for their skill as debaters. . . . Inevitably, they came out second best in the confrontations engineered by the missionaries. (Kaplan 1992: 124)

News of Christian missionary activity among the Falasha was widely reported among European Jews, and the Alliance Israélite Universelle responded by sending an emissary, Joseph Halévy, to Ethiopia in 1868 to investigate the situation. Yet from the beginning, Halévy's journey was also motivated by a mission to transform the Falashas. His goal, as Halévy wrote in his memoir of these travels, was "to purify the religious ideas of this sect" (Halévy 1877: 61). Halévy was the first to tell the Falashas they shared beliefs with people called Jews, a pivotal encounter that served to define the Beta Israel in relation to Jews abroad. It also began a process of transformation that culminated more than a century later.

During several months in their villages, Halévy encouraged the Beta Israel he met to modify their traditions, and spent a great deal of his time telling them about "the customs and rites of European Jews" (Halévy 1877: 46-47). Halévy was followed by his student, Jacques Faitlovitch, who first visited the Beta Israel during 1904-5. Here what may have been a passing encounter with Jewish modernity was lent great impact by events outside the realm of religion or politics. When Faitlovitch arrived in Ethiopia, he found a people dramatically different from those of Halévy's period, a difference owing in large part to the terrible famine that had devastated Ethiopia between 1888 and 1892 (Kaplan 1992: 143). It is estimated that mortality rates in the northwest regions where Beta Israel lived could have approached as high as 75 percent and that perhaps one-half to two-thirds of all Beta Israel died during this period (*ibid.*: 147). Beyond its devastating impact on life

and community, the famine had encouraged the movement of many of the remaining Beta Israel into the Ethiopian Church. To Beta Israel monks, an elderly and economically dependent segment of the population who were already demoralized and suffering reduced authority in the wake of the missionary challenge, the famine dealt a final blow (*ibid.*: 151). Although there was evidently a faction that rejected Faitlovitch and actively resisted his efforts (Summerfield 2003: 88), others struggling to sustain a Beta Israel identity drew on memories of Halévy's earlier visit and welcomed Faitlovitch's arrival.

The arrival of other Europeans no doubt paved the way for the Beta Israel embrace of Halévy and his successors. Along with European Christian missionaries and Jewish counter-missionaries who entered the Ethiopian highlands and began to transform Beta Israel tradition, by 1869 the first Italians had arrived on the Ethiopian coast, taking over the port of Assab in 1882. By 1889, following several battles, including one in which the Ethiopian Emperor Johannes was mortally wounded, the Italians and Ethiopians signed a treaty ceding to the Italians a new territory along the Red Sea coast to be named Eritrea.

In addition to Faitlovitch's activities in Ethiopia and introduction of Western Jewish traditions to Beta Israel villages, Faitlovitch set into motion a campaign to bring the Falasha to international awareness and to incorporate the Beta Israel into European Jewish consciousness. Following his first trip to Ethiopia, Faitlovitch went on a lecture tour of Europe and organized a network of Pro-Falasha committees (Quirin 1992: 196). By 1907

the first Falasha Committee had been established in Florence. Within a couple of years there was another in Germany, and others soon followed around the world, including in the United States. The main goal of these committees was the "education" of the community by establishing schools in Ethiopia and supporting the study of young Falashas in Europe.

It is at this point in Beta Israel history, then, that reciprocal travel enters into the narrative, with young Beta Israel replicating the Solomonic origin myth, traveling abroad and returning home with new religious knowledge. In 1905 Faitlovitch took two Beta Israel boys, Gette Jeremias and Taamrat Emmanuel, back to Europe with him; ironically, Faitlovitch had met Taamrat at the Swedish Protestant Mission at Asmara, Eritrea, where Taamrat had converted to Protestantism (*ibid.*: 194).³ These two young men, who began their studies in Paris, were the first of more than twenty young Beta Israel boys sponsored for study abroad. Gette accompanied Faitlovitch on a trip back to Ethiopia in 1908–9, but left again, along with his cousin, Solomon Isaac, for a German school in Jerusalem, where Taamrat was being educated. In 1913 Gette again returned with Faitlovitch to Ethiopia and became the first Beta Israel to teach his people at a special school established in Asmara (*ibid.*: 197). Through the agency of these young travelers, modern Jewish religious practices and music began to enter Beta Israel life.

Following a hiatus imposed by World War I, Faitlovitch again returned to Ethiopia in 1920, bringing Taamrat Emmanuel and Solomon Isaac

back to their country and taking four more youths abroad with him. Taamrat was appointed the director of a school founded in 1924 by Faitlovitch for the Beta Israel in Addis Ababa, supported by European and American resources. At its peak in the late 1920s and early 1930s, this school enrolled around eighty Beta Israel students (*ibid.*: 197).

Among the young Beta Israel men brought by Faitlovitch to Europe and Israel, the most influential for the next half century in Ethiopia would be Yona Bogale. Born in 1911 in Gondar, Yona had grown up with stories about a white Jew who had brought books to his village and taken away Gette Jeremias and Solomon Isaac. Yona was one of the boys Faitlovitch took abroad with him after returning to Gondar with Gette Jeremias in 1920 (Yona Bogale 1986: 37). Yona studied at a school in Jerusalem for two years, after which he spent four years in Germany, one in Switzerland, and a final year in France. Upon his return to Addis Ababa around 1930, Yona taught in the Faitlovitch school in Addis Ababa.

During the Italian occupation, Yona Bogale left the capital and worked as a farmer in the north. After the war, he joined the Ethiopian Ministry of Education for twelve years, one of a group of Falasha men who became prominent in the Ethiopian government. Yona later left his government post to work with the Jewish Agency and other international Jewish organizations on behalf of his community. Fluent in Hebrew, English, and German in addition to his native Amharic, Yona was a scholar whose activities included compilation of an Amharic-Hebrew dictionary. One vital aspect

of Yona's role was to serve as a conduit and translator between the Beta Israel and foreign Jewish visitors, and many, including myself in 1973, had their entries into the rural villages eased by Yona. A description of one such visit by an American Jewish rabbi during the Passover holiday in spring 1969 graphically records the transformation well under way in Beta Israel religious life and the trope of exoticism that characterized foreign Jewish interest in this process:

The service was conducted by . . . their priests, led by the High Priest . . . who is elected by the group. . . . It was a chant in Gheez, the sacred language, to the gentle accompaniment of a drum and a cymbal. This lasted a little over a half hour. I then greeted the Congregation in Hebrew which was translated into Amharic, the Ethiopian dialect, and the High Priest responded. The translations back and forth were rendered by Mr. Bogala.

After the service, the Congregation gathered outside the Synagogue. The group of children recited the Four Questions in Hebrew from Haggadoth which had been brought from Israel. They also read other portions of the Haggadah. Then the High Priest explained in Amharic the general significance of the Festival. The full moon which had risen from behind the hill overlooking the village illuminated this exotic scene. . . .

We were then taken to their Hebrew schools, one of three supported by the Education Department of the Jewish Agency, where the children greeted us with a resounding "bruchim ha'baim" [welcome] in the form of spirited Hebrew songs. (Goldstein 1969: 5, 7)

By the 1950s one outcome of a century of contact—first Europeans in Ethiopia, and later Ethiopians in Europe and Israel—was the formation of a hybrid Falasha religious and musical tradition in Ethiopia.

Musical Interlude II: Juxtapositions

The rabbi describing the scene above sketches a religious tradition in transition, partitioned into a traditional Ge'ez liturgy juxtaposed against newly introduced Hebrew liturgical practices. Throughout the period of foreign contact until the foreigners' departure from Ethiopia, performance of the Beta Israel liturgy remained largely intact, with the traditional liturgy chanted by the priests followed by a Jewish liturgy in Hebrew performed by young Beta Israel trained abroad. The traditional and new ritual complexes were maintained separately. During my extended stay in Beta Israel villages during the fall of 1973, on the eve of the Ethiopian revolution, I had ample opportunities to observe and record such juxtapositions.

Only once did I observe an attempt to combine the traditions, an occasion on which a portion of the Hebrew liturgy was interpolated into a Ge'ez ritual. This singular event took place late on the afternoon of *astasreyo*, the annual Beta Israel fast day, equivalent to the pan-Jewish Yom Kippur. *Astasreyo* consisted of a vigil, beginning around 10:00 P.M. on the eve of the fast and extending throughout the night. Except for an hour between 2:30 and 3:30 A.M., when everyone in the prayer house napped, the singing was contin-

uous until 9:00 A.M.⁴ As noted above, there was no cantillation of portions from the Five Books of Moses within Beta Israel rituals, although on the morning of *astasreyo*, several biblical portions were read in Ge'ez, including the Decalogue (Ten Commandments) from Exodus 20. At 9:00 A.M. the Ge'ez ritual adjourned, and while the priests napped, two young Beta Israel men trained in Israel led a standard Hebrew holiday morning ritual.

The Ge'ez ritual resumed at midday. Late in the afternoon, as part of several hours of ongoing chanting, the priests chanted a Ge'ez prayer that began with a text referring to the Orit: "orit zaza'at wahegga zabotu hegomu ladaqqa esra'el" (the Book of Exodus and the Law that he decreed for the children of Israel). The recording of most of the rest of this chanted prayer text is unintelligible because of background noise and long sections set in the Agawiñña dialect. However, as it concluded, the young men rose to perform the Hebrew prayer "Ashrei yoshvei betecha" (Praiseworthy are those who dwell within your house).

In the Hebrew liturgy performed on the Sabbath, the "Ashrei yoshvei betecha" is sung following the reading of the Five Books of Moses, shortly before the scrolls are placed back in the ark in which they are kept. That this Hebrew prayer was interpolated into the Beta Israel liturgy following a reference to the Ge'ez Orit reflects the considerable knowledge of Jewish liturgy on the part of the young men who stood and sang the prayer and attempted to reconcile the two traditions. They inserted the "Ashrei yoshve betecha" in a manner specifically consistent with European

(Ashkenazic) Jewish tradition, where this prayer is used on the afternoon of the Day of Atonement only during the concluding service (Posner 1972: 736).⁵

Thus, the period between approximately 1850 and 1930 brought Europe to the Beta Israel—and the first Beta Israel to Europe. This contact, expanded in the years following World War II, was reflected in the introduction of Western Jewish Hebrew texts and music into Beta Israel liturgical practice. The period post-1930 and the destruction of Jewish communities in Europe also abruptly severed the relations between European Jews and the Falasha.

The Shadow of the Holocaust: Events and Metaphors

Although the Holocaust did not consume the Beta Israel in the same manner in which it destroyed Jewish communities across Europe, it left its mark on Beta Israel life and thought. In the sections that follow I first explore certain events during World War II that had an impact on the Beta Israel at home and abroad. I then address the long shadow of the Holocaust that reemerged and continued to shape Beta Israel history long after the destruction of European Jewry.

The Events of World War II

The most direct impact of Europeans on the Beta Israel during the period from the late 1930s through the early 1940s came, of course, through the Italian occupation. Following on the heels of

the long Italian program, which had begun in the late nineteenth century, to colonize Africa and gain control of the Red Sea, the Italians invaded Ethiopia on 3 October 1935. Despite strong resistance from Ethiopian troops, which included members of the Beta Israel, the Ethiopians were overwhelmed by the Italians and the brutality of their bombings and poison gas attacks. Addis Ababa fell to Italy in the first week of May 1936, evoking considerable sympathy abroad, but no foreign military aid (Boahen 1990: 311–12; Del Boca 1969: 199–206).

Beyond the expected political and economic changes, the Italian occupation had an impact on virtually all aspects of Ethiopian life. The Italians left a permanent mark through a new colonial architecture, which was intended “to demonstrate Italian power over the local audience by designing powerful buildings and cities” (Fuller 1988: 483). In the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, this modernist architectural agenda was superimposed on an existing city, where Italian planners consciously used “the concept [of] acting upon the indigenous mentality, impressing it with the isolated grandeur of power” (ibid.: 476). The fascist building projects separated foreigners from indigenous peoples, ensuring racial segregation. Similar plans were made for northern Ethiopian towns, such as Gondar; however, these never reached fruition as they did in the south. The occupation also left its imprint on Ethiopian traditional culture, through the systematic pursuit and murder of a group of musicians known as *azmari*, who served as a focal point of national patriotism. The Ethiopians resisted the Italians in rural areas

(Shirreff 1994: 858), many of which maintained considerable independence from the occupiers because of the impassable mountainous terrain (Gebre-Egziabeher 1969: 193), but only the entry of British-sponsored forces from the Sudan and Kenya enabled the Ethiopians to defeat the Italians in 1941. Although the official Italian policy during the occupation assured "absolute respect for all religions in so far as these did not conflict with the public order and general principles of civilization" (Larebo 1988: 1), the Italians in fact repressed any group or religious organization that was a source of nationalism and resistance. Their actions extended to the Ethiopian church, most notably following an attempt on the life of the Italian viceroy, Rodolfo Graziani, when the Italians executed all the monks and deacons of the revered Debre Libanos Monastery and murdered an Ethiopian bishop. The Italian policy toward the church has been described as one of "conciliation . . . side by side with terroristic measures" (ibid.: 2).

Although "a superficial examination of Mussolini's oppressive policies has . . . led many researchers to conclude that the Beta Israel were persecuted severely during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia for being not only Ethiopians but Jewish as well," recent research presents a different picture (Summerfield 1999: 5; Summerfield 2003: 97). Some Beta Israel were active in the resistance against the Italians, and some dozens died in a 1937 massacre by the Italians, along with other Ethiopians who had given shelter to a prominent rebel (Summerfield 2003: 54). Yet,

even though it is commonly reported in popular sources that the Faitlovitch school in Addis Ababa closed as a result of the occupation, Faitlovitch's correspondence disputes this widely held view (ibid.: 53). Indeed, Faitlovitch had informed American Pro-Falasha committees well before the invasion that the school was on the verge of collapse for financial reasons. Other documents recently uncovered indicate that the school's director, Taamrat Emmanuel, in fact received a subsidy from a high-ranking Italian official (ibid.: 51).

Many of the educated, urban Beta Israel, such as Taamrat Emmanuel and Yona Bogale, eventually left Addis Ababa to avoid the Italians' persecution of educated Ethiopians. Indeed, the main village in which I carried out my fieldwork in 1973, Ambober, was founded when Beta Israel from other areas were uprooted during the Italian occupation (Shelemay 1989: 5).

Some Beta Israel did lose their lives as a direct result of the Italian occupation.⁶ However, Summerfield suggests somewhat ironically that

the legacy of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia for the Beta Israel appears to be an eventual increase in their official recognition as Jews by World Jewry. It would seem that various pro-Falasha organizations attempted to place the Falashas in the arena of world Jewry by exaggerating the impact that the occupation had on the Beta Israel in order to portray them as "suffering Jews" at the same time that European Jewry was being savagely persecuted. (Summerfield 1999: 58)

For a brief moment between 1936 and 1943, it appeared that Ethiopia might become a haven for the Jews, dramatically shifting the field of play. Proposals were made for the mass resettlement of European Jews in Italian-occupied Ethiopia. The initiative evidently began just days after the Italian occupation of Addis Ababa in 1936 (Pankhurst 1973: 235). This odd chapter in the relations among Europe, Ethiopia, and the Jews quickly became a subject of controversy among European Jews, some of whom saw the plan as a possible escape from growing persecution while others perceived it as a threat to the ongoing efforts to found a Jewish state in Palestine. The Ethiopian Jewish-state initiative, which was given considerable publicity in the international press and was a subject of discussion in diplomatic circles, was effectively ended with the beginning of World War II in Europe and the subsequent defeat of the Italians in Ethiopia in 1941. The inception, discussion, and eventual dissolution of the plan did create "a significant amount of interest in the Falashas" (ibid.), as demonstrated by a visit in August 1936 by an Italian Jewish representative to Ethiopia, Carlo Alberto Viterbo.

A final, direct impact of World War II and the Holocaust was the suspension of aid to the Beta Israel from European and American Jews (Winston 1980: 4). This hiatus extended from the inception of the Italian invasion in 1936 until the state of Israel initiated its own aid efforts in 1954. Post-World War II, American Jews assumed the mantle of European activism in Ethiopia. However, there is another dimension of this tragic pe-

riod of Jewish history in Europe that shaped subsequent events, including the immigration of the Falasha to Israel. It is to that subject that I now turn.

Holocaust Analogies

Perhaps the most startling impact of the Holocaust and the legacy of European Jews on the Beta Israel is one that emerged more than thirty years after the end of World War II. Here I refer to what the American historian Peter Novick has termed "Holocaust analogies" (Novick 1999: 243). Novick questions why the Holocaust has "come to loom so large in our [modern American] culture" (ibid.: 1). Since the 1970s, the Holocaust has been used to signify and draw attention to the Falasha situation, in large part, but not exclusively, by American Jews. By the late 1970s, one finds a proliferation of Holocaust analogies emanating from many quarters: In all these cases, the analogy was invoked as a potent symbol, one that directed the attention of the world to the difficult Beta Israel situation in Ethiopia in order to advance the acceptance of the Falasha as Jews and to ensure the community's immigration to Israel.

The complicated use of Holocaust analogies is the subject of an entire book by Novick, and a number of his statements are germane to the case study in this chapter. There is little doubt that use of Holocaust analogies in publicity mounted on behalf of the immigration of Soviet Jewry during the mid- to late 1970s (as manifest in the slogan "Never Again") was a catalyst for its use in the

Ethiopian context shortly thereafter. The Ethiopian revolution, which began in early 1974, was by 1977–78 marked by domestic disruptions and violence. The Beta Israel's situation during the revolution was not dissimilar to that during the Italian occupation, discussed briefly above: many Beta Israel suffered, as did most of their countrymen and women, although the dimensions of the Beta Israel situation were sometimes overstated by those seeking to galvanize support for Beta Israel immigration to Israel. By the late 1970s fading hopes for Beta Israel immigration as well as concern about their safety in revolutionary Ethiopia provided fertile ground for Holocaust analogies.

The propriety of the use of Holocaust analogies has often been the subject of controversy. It is clear, though, that such comparisons have been widely invoked in respect to the Falasha because of their emotional power. The use of this heavily symbolic "language of crisis" served to bring the Beta Israel yet more firmly into the European orbit, at once incorporating them within a European Jewish framework while reframing them within emotional terms that were beyond debate. The use of Holocaust analogies provided the final rationale for the incorporation of the Beta Israel as Jews within a modern Jewish context.

Wherever we look in the massive literature on the Falasha during the 1970s and 1980s, we encounter Holocaust analogies. The historian Steven Kaplan has noted that "the literature containing these themes is so vast as to defy any bibliography. It includes leaflets, pamphlets, films,

slide shows, newspaper articles, etc." (Kaplan 1993: 651 n. 16). Analogies are invoked in the popular press, in scholarly literature, and by the Ethiopian Jews themselves.

The most graphic examples are, not surprisingly, from the popular press and the world of popular culture. For instance, advertisements for the 1984 film *Falasha: Exile of the Black Jews* noted that "forty years after the Holocaust, the oldest Diaspora Jewish community, the black Jews of Ethiopia, is facing certain and imminent death." Thus the cataclysmic end of European Jewry provides a framework for interpreting the next half century of Beta Israel life.

The journalist Louis Rapoport summarized the use of Holocaust analogies in relation to the Falasha:

Perhaps it is misleading to draw comparisons between Africa and Europe, Germany or Russia and Ethiopia; yet there are some striking parallels between the pogroms directed against Jews by Europeans, Arabs and Africans alike. The pogroms of today are being directed against a once mighty Jewish tribe, whose history is no less important than the history of German Jews. (Rapoport 1981: 14)

Holocaust analogies were pervasive not only among European and American writers from the late 1970s through the final transfer of the Ethiopian Jewish community to Israel in 1991; the Holocaust was also invoked by Ethiopian Jews in Israel. For instance, a leaflet handed out on 30 October 1979 by Ethiopian Jews who demonstrat-

ed in front of the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, for Israeli government support for migration proclaimed that "many opportunities to save and bring out our brothers are passed over as the 'final solution' is carried out on the question of Ethiopian Jews. . . . Our hearts believe, and we are sure that the people of Israel and its delegates in the Knesset will identify with our struggle" (Winston 1980: 10).

Holocaust analogies, thus, have provided a powerful language of crisis that embedded multiple emotional triggers, calling on Diaspora Jewish memory and guilt over American Jewish inaction during the cataclysm in Europe and alluding to important Jewish religious injunctions about saving human life.

Musical Interlude III: The Voices of Children

Beginning in the late 1970s, small groups of Ethiopian Jews made their way to Israel, and the community's connections with Jews of the outside world increased. During this period, the juxtaposition of old Ethiopian Ge'ez liturgy and new pan-Jewish Hebrew traditions described above began to shift. With the priests no longer training anyone in their traditional religion, Beta Israel children in Ethiopia learned only new Jewish traditions brought from the outside. During these years many changes took place in Beta Israel villages as well.


The Euro-American Jewish traditions introduced into Beta Israel villages by the early 1950s

included Yona Bogale's Hebrew-Jewish calendar. Yona helped to recruit a second wave of young people to study Jewish ritual and Hebrew in Israel. In the final quarter century of Yona's life and career—he left Ethiopia in 1979 and died in Israel in 1987—we can view the template for the final transformation of Beta Israel religious life on a local level.

Of particular importance in introducing Jewish liturgy and music to the villages was the opening in 1954 of a seminary in Asmara, Eritrea, by the Jewish Agency Department for Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora. The initial group of thirty-three students brought from the Gondar area included seven Beta Israel priests who were instructed by an Israeli rabbi. The same year twelve students went to Israel to pursue studies. Thirty-three village schools eventually opened in central Falasha villages, and additional Beta Israel students were sent to Israel. Thus, by the mid-1950s, Jewish schools were established in Beta Israel villages in the Gondar area in which hundreds of children were taught Hebrew and Jewish history (Abbink 1984: 93). By 1970 the Joint Distribution Committee (in cooperation with London Falasha Welfare Association) began to provide medical aid to Beta Israel villages, and in 1977 ORT (the Organization for Rehabilitation and Training, an international Jewish relief agency) mounted vocational efforts funded by Swedish, Canadian, West German, and British sources (Bogale n.d.).

Nowhere are these changes more clearly evident than in the generational divide regarding musical transmission. With the old Ge'ez liturgy

Figure 4.2 "Adon 'olam" (Master of the Universe). Unattributed melody, transcribed by K. K. Shelemay.



A - don 'o - lam a - sher ma - lakh be - te - rem kal ye - tsir - niv - ra...

sustained only by Beta Israel priests, the children became heirs to another musical and liturgical tradition, that of Western Jews. No better example exists than the prayer "Adon alom" (Master of the Universe), sung by the Falasha children of Ambober, Ethiopia, to greet the many Jewish visitors from abroad who arrived in their villages.

Beta Israel children learned this prayer not in the prayer house, but in the schoolhouse, taught by teachers who had studied in Israel, where, during the early decades of the Jewish State, "Adon 'olam" (see fig. 4.2) was sung in schools at the end of morning prayers (Herzog 1972: 298). Through song, Beta Israel children could communicate in a language and musical system that was understood by their European and American Jewish visitors. Music thereby affirmed the connection and demonstrated that modern Beta Israel sang in "harmony" with their compatriots from abroad. Part of the heritage of the long European engagement with the Beta Israel was the transplantation of a European-derived Ashkenazic liturgy in Falasha villages and the absorption of a European musical vocabulary during the formative years of Beta Israel children.

The End of Falasha History and the Birth of the Ethiopian Jews

The closing chapter of Beta Israel life in Ethiopia took place between 1980 and 1992. These traumatic years saw a mass exodus of many Ethiopians, including Beta Israel, because of intense drought and famine. By 1983 more than four thousand Beta Israel had crossed the border into the Sudan and were subsequently transported to Israel. Later groups encountered more difficulties, both in reaching the Sudan and in overcoming deteriorating conditions in the refugee camps. Between November 1984 and January 1985 another six thousand Ethiopian Jews were airlifted to Israel in an effort that came to be known as Operation Moses. A subsequent evacuation removed more Beta Israel from the Sudan in March 1985, and another two thousand arrived in Israel from Ethiopia by the end of 1989. By 1990 nearly twenty thousand Ethiopian Jews had converged in Addis Ababa, hoping to travel to Israel. With the fall of the revolutionary Ethiopian government in May 1991, a sum of \$35 million was paid to the Ethiopian government, and on 24–25 May 1991 more than fourteen thousand Beta Israel were airlifted to Israel in Operation Solomon. This evacuation,

ironically commemorating the community's Solomonic origins, marked the end of the Falasha community in Ethiopia (Westheimer and Kaplan 1992: 3).

The Ethiopian Jews in Israel have largely discarded their traditional liturgy and its music; most Ethiopian Jews have chosen to worship in existing Israeli synagogues. Because of their long-time exposure to European and American Jewish liturgy and music, many affiliate with synagogues that celebrate a European Jewish rite. By the late 1980s Ethiopian Jews in Israel were showing evidence of a strong European influence in many aspects of their daily life and ritual. These changes have been the subject of occasional comment in the press, such as the following observation from a cookbook author who sought to record different ethnic recipes for Jewish holidays: "I ran into lots of problems. . . . When I interviewed the wife of an immigrant rabbi from Ethiopia, she started to spout Ashkenazic customs" (Nathan 1987).

The end of Beta Israel history in Ethiopia and what has been termed "the invention of the Ethiopian Jews" (Kaplan 1993) also spelled the end to claims of the community's descent based on the *Kebra Nagast*. If their Solomonic origins tied the Beta Israel to an Ethiopian elite, this Ethiopian heritage threatened to separate them from their fellow Jews in Israel. By the early 1990s Ethiopian Jews in Israel "almost unanimously" rejected any connection to the tradition of Solomon and Sheba. Rather, they presented themselves either as descendants of Jews who followed the biblical Prophet Jeremiah to Egypt, or, in keeping with

rabbinic opinion, as descendants of the lost tribe of Dan (Abbink 1990: 415–16; Kaplan 1993: 652). Another narrative here begins.

Musical Interlude IV: The Invention of Ethiopian Jewish Music

Another "Adon 'olam" sung by Beta Israel children has been widely distributed on a commercial recording issued in Israel in 1993 (Gronich 1993) and brings Beta Israel music history forward into a framework fully reshaped by European musical styles and sensibilities. This is one of several recordings issued by the Israeli musician Shlomo Gronich, who founded the Sheba Choir, an ensemble consisting of children who had immigrated to Israel from Ethiopia. Gronich's "Adon 'olam" begins with an organ introduction quoting J. S. Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor. Next, the Sheba Choir enters, performing "Adon 'olam" to a melody composed by the Israeli singer/songwriter Uzi Chitman in 1975 (see fig. 4.3) that is widely sung in Israel and the United States.⁷ Above the choral refrain, Gronich sings a wordless countermelody. Following a neo-oriental transition played by Middle Eastern drum, violin, and synthesizer and punctuated by vocal cries, yet another "Adon 'olam" begins, this one composed by the Russian cantor Eliezar Gero-vitch (see fig. 4.4).⁸ In this single recording, the Sheba Choir incorporates several European and European-derived musical styles, just as they have absorbed other European influences over the course of their history.

Figure 4.3 "Adon 'olam" (Master of the Universe). Melody by Uzi Chitman, transcribed by K. K. Shelemay.

A-don 'o - lam a - sher ma - lakh be - te - rem kal ye - tsir niv - ra

l' - et na'a - sa v' - chef - tso kol a - zay me - lekh a - zay me - lekh she - mo niq - ra...

"Master of the universe, Who reigned before any form was created
At the time when His will brought all into being—then as 'King' was His Name proclaimed."
(Translation from Scherman and Zlotowitz 1999: 353)

Figure 4.4 "Adon 'olam" (Master of the Universe). Melody by Eliezar M. Gerovitch, transcribed by K. K. Shelemay.

A - don 'o - lam a - sher ma - lakh be - te - rem kal ye - tsir niv - ra l' -

- et na'a - sa v' - chef - tso - kol a - zay me - lekh she - mo niq - ra...

Conclusions

This *midrash* has been about echoes, about the manner in which history reverberates in musical sound, each fading into the distance as another comes into earshot. We have encountered echoes of Europe among Beta Israel in Ethiopia, which after more than a century of intensity, have fallen silent. The echoes of Ethiopia in Europe and America are now resounding, with Ethiopian Jews living and singing not just in Israel, often to tunes of European and American provenance, but throughout Europe and the United States. If the Beta Israel have been transformed into Ethiopian Jews through their long encounter with Europe, their impact on Europeans and Americans remains ongoing. They are for the first time raising their voices in these new contexts, setting off new echoes.

An echo is a reverberation that embeds continuous transformation. It moves between locales, changing as it reverberates through time and space. Similarly, the process of constant transformation that permeated the Beta Israel past remains a powerful force in the Ethiopian Jewish present. A recent ethnography of Ethiopian Jews in Israel suggested that the notion of transformation itself was "a unifying concept" in Beta Israel consciousness, past and present (Salamon 1999: 8). Drawing on old Ethiopian Christian beliefs that Beta Israel men and women possessed the power both to transform objects and to assume different shapes, some have suggested that Beta Israel have absorbed and applied this expectation to enable them to negotiate and survive constant

change. The deep-seated belief in the transformation of people, materials, and objects certainly characterized Beta Israel work as smiths and potters, and it may well be that the transformation of liturgical and musical expression can be posited within this same framework, described as a thoroughgoing and ubiquitous process of the Beta Israel consciousness (*ibid.*: 117–19).

This *midrash*, with its disputed beginnings, has no single ending. If we take as its metaphorical source the Ge'ez *Orit* and its resonance in Ethiopian culture, we must also acknowledge the irony of the late twentieth-century rejection by the Ethiopian Jews of the myth of their descent from Solomon and Sheba. This *midrash* also leaves many unanswered questions. Told from the point of view of Ethiopian history, the Ethiopian Jews are now an Ethiopian people in diaspora. Told from the perspective of Israel and Jewish Europe, the Beta Israel were too long Jews of the Diaspora and have only now, within the last decade, "come home" to Israel. So in the end, we cannot even be certain where exactly the Beta Israel can be found. Perhaps the answer lies on both sides of this divide: If the Ethiopian Jews were in diaspora in Ethiopia, the Beta Israel are perhaps equally so in Israel.

Europe, long before the modern age, assumed the power of defining the other. For more than 150 years, Europe has sought to remake the Ethiopian Jews in its image. Throughout this period the Ethiopian Jews have increasingly reshaped themselves and redefined the bonds of kinship thought to unite them with Jews around the globe. They have done so through both sounds and silences,

by the traditions they maintained, such as the *Kebra Nagast*, and their Ge'ez liturgy, and by the traditions they have not observed, such as biblical cantillation. They introduced new elements to our understanding of religious hybridity. The Ethiopian Jews also recast the most powerful image of modern European Jewish history, the Holo-

caust, charging it with new and contested meanings as it echoed more than half a century after that catastrophe. And throughout, they sang, providing the echoes through which we have been able to trace the end of Falasha history and the transformation of the Ethiopian Jews.



::: NOTES :::

I thank Philip V. Bohlman for inviting me to participate in the Honigberg Lectures and for his helpful comments on aspects of content and style. I also thank Steven Kaplan for insightful suggestions that strengthened this essay.

1. The Ethiopian people discussed in this essay are known by several names. Their traditional tribal name, Beta Israel, translates as "House of Israel." The name "Falasha," by which they were commonly known for centuries, derives either from a fifteenth-century Ethiopian imperial decree forbidding land ownership to non-Christians or from the word *falasyan*, which means "monk." Since the late 1970s, the name "Falasha" has been considered pejorative, and by the 1980s most in the Beta Israel community had begun to call themselves "Ethiopian Jews." Here I will use "Beta Israel" when referring to aspects of traditional Ethiopian identity, cultural expression, and religion; "Falasha" when discussing Ethiopian historical or ethnographic sources that use that name; and "Ethiopian Jews" when touching on aspects of late twentieth-century identity, especially in Israel.

2. Conflicting interpretations of Beta Israel history both within and outside the community are too complex to revisit here. For commentary about relevant issues relating to the symbolic construction of identity, see the discussions in Cohen 2000. Discussions relating specifically to Beta Israel identity and constructions of Beta

Israel history are explored at length in Shelemay 1989 and Kaplan 1992.

3. It is traditional to refer to Ethiopians by their first names.

4. It should be emphasized that the entire Beta Israel liturgy is sung, with no spoken portions except a brief homily in Amharic at the end of rituals.

5. In Sephardic tradition, this prayer occurs twice, once earlier during the morning service and then during the concluding afternoon service.

6. Two teachers from the Falasha School in Addis Ababa—Makonen Levy, who had spent six years in England, and Yonathan Wizkims, who had studied in Germany and France—were evidently imprisoned along with several of their students, and they died in captivity (Abbink 1984: 89; Kessler 1982: 146). Several of the young Beta Israel students taken by Faitlovitch to Europe perished there, although all died during the early 1930s and as a result of illness, not persecution (Trevisan Semi 1999; Weil 1999).

7. I thank Violet Gilboa of the Harvard University Judaica Collection for confirming this date. A recording of Chitman's "Adon 'olam" performed by the composer can be heard on Chitman 1994.

8. Eliezar M. Gerovitch (1844–1914), born in Rostov, Russia was an important nineteenth-century cantor who published two collections of synagogue song (Weisser

1983: 124). His "Adon 'olam" melody has been widely circulated throughout the twentieth century, including in Europe and the United States (see, e.g., *Union Songster* 1960: 8).

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