

March 27, 2008

The Jerusalem Post

Because I am a Jew

By Roberta Fahn Schoffman

Black Jews, Jews, and Other Heroes: How Grassroots Activism led to the Rescue of the Ethiopian Jews
By Howard Lenhoff

Gefen

324 pages; \$24.95

Ethiopian Sigd Festival. Lenhoff's book is a call to action.

Whether out of apathy or racism, neither Israel nor the world Jewish community was eager at first to assist the Jews languishing in Ethiopia or even recognize them as members of the Jewish people. In his eloquent book *Black Jews, Jews, and Other Heroes*, Howard Lenhoff, longtime leader of the American Association of Ethiopian Jews (AAEJ), tells the story of how and why this changed. This important book on a unique chapter in Jewish communal history is testimony to the ability of the few to significantly alter the opinion, allocation of resources and decisions of the mighty.

An improbable catalyst, Lenhoff was a quiet professor of biology at the University of California at Irvine when he first visited Israel in 1973. Learning of the trickle of Ethiopian immigrants in Israel at that time, Lenhoff soon discovered, in his words, that "some government bureaucrats responsible for implementing Israel's policy of open doors held it much wider for some Jews than others."

It was then that he set off on his personal crusade to rescue Ethiopian Jewry, and ultimately came to shape and lead the AAEJ. It was an outrageous mission that had few believers and fewer resources: to save thousands of black Jews living in huts in deepest Africa who kept kosher and recited the Shema.

Following an emotional meeting with Rachamim Elazar, an early Ethiopian immigrant who asked Lenhoff to lend him \$1,000 to bring his brother to Israel, the author explains: "Thus began the commitment which consumed [my family] for nearly two decades. Frequently, when asked why I took on such an arduous task, about the only answer that rings true is *ki ani Yehudi*, 'because I am a Jew.'"

A wild combination of historical revisionism, clandestine activities and knocking heads against a long silent wall, the AAEJ campaign was not a typical grassroots operation. Howard Lenhoff and his compatriots understood that in spite of extensive opposition, the ingathering of the Ethiopian exiles would be a great gift to the state of Israel and to world Jewry. And yet, for many years, this view was a minority opinion that was met with powerful opposition. Lenhoff writes of one attempt in a campaign to silence their voices: "Friendly editors of Jewish newspapers and national magazines confided that they had been asked by either Israeli consulate officials or Federation leaders to refrain from publishing articles on Ethiopian Jews."

Remarkably, the AAEJ succeeded in withstanding the pressures applied by American Jewish leaders, the Israeli government, and many others who accused the group of undermining Israel's complex relations with Ethiopia and endangering the lives of the "Falasha," as they were then called.

With "an admixture of individualism and obsession," Lenhoff began by motivating college students and other non-establishment figures to demonstrate in front of Israeli consulates. Ratcheting up his activity, he lobbied members of Congress and other officials and fought myriad battles with organized American Jewry. (Indeed in 1979, I was hired by the Los Angeles Jewish Federation to head up the Oppressed Jewry Desk of the Community Relations Committee, in part to placate Lenhoff and the AAEJ, and hopefully move them into more traditional modes of support. But inevitably his influence on me was far greater than mine on him.) Undaunted, Lenhoff also met with president Ephraim Katzir and prime minister Menachem Begin, chief rabbis and numerous Jewish Agency functionaries.

The book offers incisive observations about communal priorities and policy while giving the reader an intimate look at both the writer and Beta Yisrael, the Jews of Ethiopia. The fascinating journey leads from the mud huts of the northern Gondar region and the squalor of Sudanese refugee camps to the halls of Israeli bureaucracy and the seats of Jewish power. Lenhoff's absorbing account includes such poignant moments as the first meeting held by Ashkenazi chief rabbi Shlomo Goren in 1978 with an elderly Ethiopian *kes* (Jewish religious leader), who said: "Please tell us, Great Rabbi, what has happened to the Jewish people in the two thousand years we were in the Diaspora?"

Two of the book's chapters were written by Jerry Weaver, an American diplomat who coordinated US refugee affairs in the Sudan from 1982-85. Credited with a central role in the lifesaving movement of Ethiopian Jews out of the wretched Sudanese refugee camps, Weaver makes public for the first time behind-the-scenes machinations that led to the exodus. Describing the sudden influx of thousands of Jewish refugees to the camps in March 1984, he writes: "Even from the perspective of a quarter of a century, what happened [at Um Raquba] and why so many Ethiopian Jews died remains an enigma... The vulnerable - the very young, the elderly, the ill - died first. Within weeks, all became vulnerable."

Weaver sheds light on the airlifts out of Sudan - the covert actions of the Mossad and Sudanese officials, critical assistance by the State Department and vice president George Bush, and many other unsung heroes of the secret Operations Moses and Solomon. With Khartoum's agreement to cooperate came the demand that "no Israeli could touch ground in Sudan."

Weaver was instrumental in hammering out the plan in which the "Israelis would provide the aircraft, someone to handle the planes in and out of the Khartoum International Airport, a "Falasha-finder" to identify bona fide Ethiopian Jews from other Ethiopian refugees, and the money to purchase local supplies and services."

Lenhoff's important book spans the history of the AAEJ from its insignificant beginnings in 1974 to 1993, when they achieved their objective of convincing Israel, the US, Sudan and the Ethiopian Marxist government that "our goal of rescuing the Ethiopian Jews and getting them to Israel also would serve their political interests."

By its own account, the AAEJ succeeded in bringing 1,239 Ethiopians to Israel. But there is no doubt that this ragtag organization's relentless urging and amateur rescue efforts jumpstarted the process that ultimately delivered nearly the whole population of Ethiopian Jews to Israel.

Nearly 20 years after setting up shop, the AAEJ disbanded. But that is not the end of the story. Today's more than 110,000 Ethiopian-Israelis have yet to achieve equal opportunities and many live in poverty. One cannot read *Black Jews, Jews, and Other Heroes* without sensing an urgent call to action. As Lenhoff told the AAEJ board in 1980, "We cannot relent. We cannot wait. We must act now."
