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## The Complexities of Conversion among the “Felesmura”

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## *The Complexities of Conversion among the “Felesmura”*

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Shalva Weil\*

This paper will discuss the complexities of conversion in the context of the so-called “Felesmura”, Beta Israel (Falashas)<sup>1</sup> who converted to Christianity from Ethiopic Judaism. The paper will focus on conversion which took place from the nineteenth century on among groups of Beta Israel, who are today converting “back” to Judaism.

### **The Study of Conversion**

Religious conversion implies accepting a set of beliefs and practices which is different from a system of truth and religious commitment previously experienced (HEIRICH 1977). Conversion can be individual familial, or communal. The study of conversion from one religion to another has been a traditional subject of interest for anthropologists and historians alike, and has been a central theme in general Ethiopian studies.<sup>2</sup> However, it has suffered from some major limitations. It has characteristically been discussed in relation to Christianity, “conversion” often being synonymous with “conversion to Christianity” (PAUW 1975). In addition, research has tried to don the mask of objectivity, while in practice actually supporting conversion, the researcher at times being the proselytizer. Lienhardt, whose studies of the Dinka tribe constitute classic reading in Ethiopian studies, is probably the best example of this kind. (LIENHARDT 1961)

In Ethiopian studies, it has become recognized that conversion to Christianity is not an exclusive field, while conversion to Islam is increasingly being scrutinized. Scholars have become aware of the influences of external polemics and global connections in which Christian and Muslim identities are being contested in the public sphere (ABBINK 2011). Within Islam itself, conversion has been taking place from Sufi mystical Islam to reformist movements labeled as “Wuhhabi” or “Salafi” (ERLICH 2007; MARCUS 2008). Conversion to Judaism, traditionally a non-proselytizing world religion,<sup>3</sup> has been a relatively unexplored field, although there is now more general academic interest in this trend too,

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<sup>1</sup> The group once known as “Falashas” call themselves “Ethiopian Jews” in Israel, but the scientific literature tends to refer to them as “Beta Israel” in their Ethiopian context. For a discussion of designations of this group, see WEIL 1995.

<sup>2</sup> KAPLAN 2004 has reviewed the literature prior to 2004.

<sup>3</sup> There are, however, strands in Judaism that believe in Jewish missionary activity in order to speed up the Redemption.

particularly in Africa, among groups who claim to be “Black Jews”.<sup>4</sup> Nor have the conversions of the Beta Israel of Ethiopia escaped the gaze of researchers. Based on 86 record cards reporting on the conversion of Falasha men and women in the Dabat Protestant mission during the years 1955-1960, Trevisan Semi also examined the reversibility of these conversions (TREVISAN SEMI 2002).

The reasons for group conversion are often intriguing and encompass such searching questions as why one group in a particular culture area might be reluctant to convert to a world religion while another group might endorse it (RIGBY 1981); why conversion movements gain sudden popularity; and why people convert at all (KAMMERER 1990). In Ethiopia, not only the Felesmura are interested in converting to Judaism, but also a group calling themselves the Bete Abraham are interested in aligning themselves with Judaism,<sup>5</sup> although to date this group so far has not succeeded in persuading world Jewry of the authenticity of their claims. Ideas about the millennium are often associated with conversion, and sometimes account for periods of intense religious fervor (Cf. WILSON 1973).

Globally, research into proselytization has tended to focus upon a single conversion movement, irrespective of the fact that adherents to one religion may have undergone multiple transformations. In the case of indigenous religions, believers may adapt basic elements of traditional religion with a more dominant religion; in the case of world religions, adherents may convert to a second, or even third, world religion in the course of one life-span.

I have noted the complexities of dual or multiple conversion in my previous writings, notably with reference to issues of conversion among a collection of different tribal peoples claiming Israelite descent who lived in the Indo-Burmese borderlands, and some of whom today live in the State of Israel. In India, they were known by a variety of appellations, but collectively as the Shinlung (WEIL 2003), or variously as the Chikim, a combination of Chin-Kuki-Mizo (SAMRA 2009) or the Zo (SAMRA 2012). In Israel, they are known as “Bnei Menasseh”, linking them with the Biblical tribe of Menasseh. Instead of describing a single conversion movement, which is the usual focus of articles on religious conversion, I highlighted the phenomenon of dual conversion. The conversion of the Bnei Menasseh took place in two stages: the first was from different types of animistic religions to Christianity, and the second stage of the conversion was from Christianity to Judaism. While in the first stage, the conversion was from indigenous religions to a world religion, in the second stage, the conversion was from one world religion (Christianity) to another (Judaism), although admittedly Judaism is relatively insignificant in India and Burma (WEIL 2003). Through the process of “replacement” (KAMMERER 1990:287) by which the tribal peoples abandon one set of norms and customs and change their religious

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<sup>4</sup> In June 2012, I presented a paper at a conference organised by ISSAJ, the International Society for the Study of African Jewry, which took place at Pietermaritzburg, South Africa on “Black Jews in Africa”. My paper on the Ethiopian Jews was the only paper on a group of Jews formally recognised as such by the State of Israel and by most Rabbinical authorities. The other papers were on diverse groups in Africa claiming either Israelite or Judaic connections, some of which have converted formally to Judaism with the aid of Western Rabbis.

<sup>5</sup> By 2012, they called themselves the “Bet Abraham Jewish Community”. BRUDER 2011 designated them “Beit Avraham”.

identification and participation, the Shinlung converted to a second world religion, while retaining the connection between traditional religious beliefs and the new religious cognitive order.

In this paper, I will delve further into the processes of “double conversion” to Judaism, but this time in an Ethiopian context in relation to the Felesmura, whose ancestors were Beta Israel (or Falashas). A discussion of their double conversion is virtually impossible without an initial explanation of the history and identity of members of this group.

### **The Falashas/Beta Israel in Ethiopia<sup>6</sup>**

The Beta Israel lived in hundreds of villages in North-West Ethiopia, scattered throughout the provinces of Simien, Dembeya, Begemder, Tigray, Lasta and Qwara. They spoke two principal local languages, Amharic and Tigrinya, mixed with some Agau.

The Beta Israel were monotheistic, practising a Torah-based Judaism, without observing the Oral Law, as other Jewish communities. They followed both the lunar and solar calendar, and observed a complex cycle of fasts, and festivals, circumcising their boys on the eighth day, and refraining from work on the Sabbath. Their religious practices were influenced by Ethiopic Christians and many elements were in common to both religions, such as praying to Jerusalem, the common liturgical language of Geez, and the longing for Zion.

According to many authorities, the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Aksum were Jewish before the advent of Christianity in the third to fourth century. A popular Ethiopian belief is that the Beta Israel are descendants of Israelite henchmen, who arrived with Menelik, the son of the union of King Solomon and Queen Sheba. Another theory is that they are descendants of the “lost” Israelite tribe of Dan. Some posit that the Beta Israel emerged as an identifiable Jewish group between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Travelers reported the presence of Jews in Ethiopia, from Eldad Ha-Dani in the ninth century, to Benjamin of Tudela in the twelfth. Documentary evidence of a Judaized group opposing the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is found in a royal chronicle from the reign of Emperor Amde Zion (1314-1344). During the reigns of Emperors Ishaq (1413-1438) and Susenyos (1607-1632), there are reports of “Ayhud”, who resisted conversion to Christianity. They were defeated, lost their rights to land (rist), and became a subjugated people, employed in low-class occupations as blacksmiths, weavers and potters, and accused of possessing *buda*, or magical evil eye powers. During the reign of Emperor Sarsa Dengel (1563-97), a belligerent attempt in Wogera ended in the captivity, massacre and enslavement of hundreds of Beta Israel. During the reign of Emperor Fasilades (1632-7), Gondar became the political metropolis of the empire, and the situation of the Beta Israel improved. They were employed in higher-ranking professions, as carpenters and masons in the churches and royal castles; this practice was continued by Emperors Yohannes I and Iyasu I. Although the economic position of the Beta Israel subsequently deteriorated, they continued in their roles as craftsmen well into the twentieth century.

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<sup>6</sup> This section is based upon WEIL 2011a, which provides a succinct overview. Important studies of this community include KAPLAN 1992; QUIRIN 1992; PARFITT and TREVISAN SEMI 1999.

The encounter with the Western world broadly began in the nineteenth century. Protestant missionaries succeeded in converting some Beta Israel, while challenging their beliefs and religious practices, such as monasticism, sacrifices, and strict code of purity laws. At the same time, a “counter-mission” led by Jacques Faitlovitch (1881-1953), the Jewish student of the French Semiticist Joseph Halévy (1827-1917) who had met with Beta Israel in Ethiopia in 1867, began in 1904-5. Until 1935, Dr. Faitlovitch brought 25 young males to different Jewish communities in Palestine and Europe with the idea that they would study normative Judaism and then return and educate other Ethiopian Jews in Ethiopia. In 1923, Dr. Faitlovitch established a “Falasha school” in Addis Abeba, which operated until the Italian occupation of Ethiopia in 1935-6.

There was no mass emigration from Ethiopia by the Beta Israel after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. Indeed, their “Jewishness” was also brought into question in that they had been cut off from mainstream Judaism and did not know the Oral Law. From the Ethiopian side, there was also resistance to their emigration. In the 1950s, Emperor Haile Selassie allowed two groups of young Beta Israel pupils to study in a dormitory school in Israel, on condition that they return. A breakthrough occurred in 1973 and in 1975 respectively when Israel’s two Chief Rabbis declared that the “Falashas” could be recognized as descendants of the “lost” tribe of Dan and thereby return to their historic homeland, Israel. In 1986, Ethiopian Jews in Israel staged a strike opposite the offices of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate in Jerusalem objecting to the symbolic conversion they had to undergo in order to be accepted as “full” Jews. Today, there are still minor obstacles in registering Ethiopian Jewish marriages. *Qesoch* (Ethiopian priests) act as spiritual leaders for the older generation, alongside young modern orthodox Ethiopian *rabbis*, who have been ordained in Israel.

Until 1984, several hundred Beta Israel managed to reach Israel. Eventually, in 1984-5, Operation Moses took place, in which 7,700 Beta Israel were airlifted from the refugee camps in the Sudan to Israel; an estimated 4,000 died on the way. The Operation was terminated suddenly by the embarrassed Sudanese government, once knowledge of it had reached the press. In 1989, diplomatic relations were restored between Ethiopia and Israel. In May 1991, after international pressure demanded the rescue and emigration of the Beta Israel, Operation Solomon took place. 14,310 Jews were airlifted of Ethiopia to Israel in 36 hours, as the future of the Ethiopian government headed by Mengistu Haile Mariam hung in balance.

During the 1990s, different groups in Ethiopia began claiming the right to immigrate to Israel, which resulted in the airlift of a few thousand Beta Israel from the remote area of Qwara. In addition, thousands of “Felesmura”, claiming descent from Beta Israel who converted to Christianity from the nineteenth century on, have since migrated to Israel and converted to Judaism; more are still waiting in Ethiopia. Today, there are over 130,000 people of Ethiopian descent living in Israel, making it the second largest Ethiopian diaspora globally. Approximately half of these belong to the category “Felesmura”. Over 20% of the Ethiopian Jewish community is born in Israel.

## Dual Conversion in Ethiopia

While dual conversion in the Western world may be unusual, the fluidity of Christianity and Judaism in Ethiopia has been well documented (PANKHURST 1992). To begin with, the two religions are remarkably similar in many respects. In addition, throughout Ethiopian history, famous personalities converted one way or the other. The process began when the Axumite king Ezana purportedly of Judaic origin, converted to Christianity (KAPLAN 1982). Yet, at the same time, some people resisted his decree and converted to Judaism.

### *Conversion to Christianity*

The focus of our paper, however, is the conversion from Ethiopic Judaism to Christianity in modern times. This was largely effected by foreign missionary activity in Ethiopia. The missionaries came from a variety of European countries, and their proliferation can be attributed to colonialism, on the one hand, and the interests of some Ethiopian rulers in Europe, (in particular, the need to acquire firearms from the West to wage local wars), on the other. One of the first missionaries who set foot in Ethiopia in the new era was Rev. Samuel Gobat of the Church Missionary Society, who encouraged the establishment of the Pilgrim Mission from St Chrischona Institute at Basel in 1856 (GOBAT 1850),<sup>7</sup> and the Falasha Mission under the auspices of the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews in 1859 (GIDNEY 1899). In 1862, the Church of Scotland also set up a short-lived Falasha Mission in Ethiopia. The attitude of different Ethiopian rulers to the foreign missionaries vacillated and even the same ruler changed his mind during his own lifetime. Tewodros II at first tolerated European missionaries, but later imprisoned them, culminating in his own suicide in 1868.

The Beta Israel were a common target for all the missionaries, both because of their lowly status in Ethiopia and because of the belief that by converting members of the “Chosen People” wherever they be, the Christians could hasten the Redemption. In addition, the missionaries hoped that by proselytizing among the Beta Israel, they could penetrate and revive the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. This was the attitude of the major missionary for the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews, Henry Aaron Stern (1820-1885), himself a converted Jew from Germany (STERN 1862). In Gondar, Stern held disputations with Beta Israel leaders, in which he challenged their disbelief in Jesus Christ as the Messiah, and scorned their rudimentary knowledge of the Bible (SEEMAN 2000).

In 1863 Emperor Tewodros, insulted that he had never received a reply to his letter to Queen Victoria, imprisoned Stern along with nine fellow missionaries and British diplomatic staff (WEIL 2010). A British expeditionary force, led by Sir Robert Napier, commander-in-chief of the Bombay army, with 12,000 soldiers, looted the imperial capital, and killed 700 Ethiopian defenders, freed Stern and the others. Tewodros, defeated, committed suicide. Yohannes IV (1871-89) of Tigray province attempted to eradicate the missions with a view to establishing doctrinal unity within the Orthodox Church. He was particularly preoccupied with the Catholics in the north (QUIRIN 1991:174-5).

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<sup>7</sup> See also the paper by LIS 2015, also published in these proceedings.

Under Menelik 11 (1889-1913), the mission returned. During Haile Selassie's regime, missionaries were only allowed to proselytize among non-Christian ethnic groups, and the Beta Israel thus became "favourite" targets. There were several missions to the Beta Israel, not least the mission headed by Eric Payne (PAYNE 1972). Throughout, the missionaries trained local Ethiopians, known as 'native agents', who could carry on their work, particularly during the periods that they were expelled from Ethiopia and worked from abroad (SMIDT 2005). One of these native agents was the Falasha-born missionary Berru Webe (QUIRIN 2003: 545-6).

Perhaps the best known was Mikael Aragawi (1848-1931), who worked among the Beta Israel population on behalf of the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews during the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century (WEIL 2008, 2011b.). Aragawi was born in Dembya to a father, who was the servant of Reverend J. Nicholayson, the Protestant missionary Martin Flad's cook, who accompanied Flad on his first mission from Jerusalem to Ethiopia in 1855 (FLAD 1866). Aragawi's mother died when he was three and his father gave him to Flad and his wife to raise. Flad facilitated Aragawi's education in Europe, first at an orphanage in Germany. In 1873, Aragawi was dedicated as a missionary at the St Chrischona Institute in Switzerland. Due to Flad's huge influence over the Beta Israel, the converts were known colloquially as *Ye-Ato Flad Lejoch* ("Children (adherents) of Mr. Flad"), as well as "Falasha Christians" and *Ye-Miryam woded* ("lovers of Mary").<sup>8</sup> They were a liminal group, "betwixt and between", as Victor Turner would call it, having abandoned Falasha Judaism but not accepted by Ethiopic Christianity. Harman called this the "blurred identity" of the Falas Mura (sic) in that "they were ethnically, socially, culturally and socio-economically Falasha, but religiously Christian" (HARMAN 2008:12).

Despite the prominence of the subject of proselytisation among the Beta Israel and the vast scientific literature on this subject (Cf. QUIRIN 1991:198-200), which is disproportionate to the size of the Beta Israel community in Ethiopia, the number of actual converts in the nineteenth century was trifling: 65 souls converted until 1868, 1470 by 1894 and 1513 by 1908 (SUMMERFIELD 2003: 32). The number of converts in a single year rarely exceeded forty, although caution must be applied when discussing these numbers (Cf. KAPLAN 1991:127.). The fact is that since 1991 some 65,000 people so far have claimed that they are descendants of the "Falasha Christians" who converted to Christianity, and have been allowed to immigrate to the Jewish state of Israel through that country's Law of Return, which recognizes the right of immigration for people descended from Jews.

#### *b. Conversion to Judaism*

Conversion to the Judaism of the Beta Israel in Ethiopia had been taking place for generations, usually on the part of Christians, but also by animists and members of other religions. Some of the converts were *barya* or slaves from the Sudan. These converts had to isolate themselves for a week, only eating chickpeas and drinking water. During the conversion ceremony itself, which is not dissimilar to orthodox conversion ceremonies in other Jewish communities today, the converts shaved their head, immersed themselves in

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<sup>8</sup> For designations of the converts, see QUIRIN 1991: 185-6.

water, washed their garments and were given a new name. They learned about the new religion and if uncircumcised, had to undergo the circumcision ceremony.<sup>9</sup>

The process of conversion to Judaism among the Felesmura began some 20 years ago, after the termination of Operation Solomon (1991). Their link to Judaism was based on the claim that they had converted to Christianity through necessity and now wished to “return” to Judaism, albeit a new form of the Jewish religion with little in common with their indigenous religious beliefs. The dual conversion appealed to ancient ties, as well as creating new identities of ethnicity and nationalism in a new location – Israel.

Until their mass emigration to the state of Israel, as mentioned, the Beta Israel observed a Torah-based type of religion without keeping the Jewish Oral Law. Those proselytized, *Ye-Miryam Woded*, were also rejected by the *Oritawi* (Torah-abiding) Beta Israel. Today, these same people, who re-emerged as Felesmura, are converting in formal ceremonies supervised by Israeli Rabbis to mainstream Judaism. This brand of Rabbinic Judaism is quite different from ancient “Falasha Judaism” in which sacrifices were performed, where there was no separation between meat and milk food products and where purity laws were observed in conjunction with Biblical exhortations.

In Israel, the Rubinstein committee (1991), the Tsaban committee (1992) established by the Minister of Absorption by that name, and the Handel committee (2001), set up commissions of enquiry to understand the history and demography of the Felesmura and to decide their fate in relation to the State of Israel. According to Harman, between 1991 and 2007 alone, the Knesset (Parliament) Committee for Immigration, Absorption, and Diaspora Affairs conducted over one hundred sessions about the Falash Mura (HARMAN 2008: 14 fn 31). The consensus was that in order to qualify for the Israeli Law of Return, these Felesmura had to agree to “return to Judaism”.

The “return to Judaism” is an official orthodox conversion embraced by the State of Israel. According to the official Israeli Government Portal,<sup>10</sup> the conversion process consists of the five following steps:

1. Presenting documents and enrolling to conversion process
2. Judaism studies in a conversion course
3. Applying to a conversion court
4. A ceremony in the Rabbinical court which includes an immersion in a *Mikveh* i.e. ritual bath (women and men) and performing a *Brit Mila* i.e. circumcision ceremony (men).
5. Getting a conversion certificate and updating religion status in the Ministry of Interior.

In the case of the Felesmura, since circumcision had already been carried out in Ethiopia, the ceremony included a symbolic “shedding of blood”. According to the government website, any person who successfully completes the conversion process then becomes a “Jew for all intents and purposes” and his status is identical to that of any other Jew, born to a Jewish mother. It is significant that the site writes: “The process is

<sup>9</sup> Interviews carried out with informants in Israel during 2011

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.gov.il/FirstGov/TopNavEng/EngSituations/ESCConversion/ESCNewProcess/>



irreversible and once you have been declared Jewish, you will not be able to convert back to your previous religion”. However, this is neither necessarily factually nor *halachically* (Jewish legally) correct.

In Israel, the new immigrants, as converts to Judaism from Ethiopia, are entitled to subsidized public housing, free Hebrew tuition, an initial cash payment for “absorption”, and special educational advantages. They serve in the Israel Defence Forces. The majority of Ethiopian Jewish adults in Israel live beneath the poverty line. The seven-generation Ethiopian kinship unit, *zemed*, is beginning to break down. The laws of ritual impurity observed in Ethiopia, are being modified. Married women are encouraged to go out to work in order to assist with the family income.

In practice, some Felesmura continue to attend Christian prayer houses in Israel or re-convert to Pentecostalism or other denominations. The vast majority, however, are recognized and consider themselves as Jewish citizens in the state of Israel; some are more religious and others become what Israelis call “secular”.

## Conclusion

This paper has documented the two-pronged conversion of the Felesmura, from Ethiopic Judaism to Protestant Christianity, on the one hand, and from Christianity to Rabbinic Judaism, on the other. The double conversion has taken place over a period of 150 years, the heyday of the conversion to Christianity taking place in the mid-nineteenth century and the heyday of the conversion to Judaism taking place in the past 20 years. The double conversion has resulted in the Felesmura “returning” to a form of Judaism that was totally foreign to them yet appropriate in the Jewish homeland and pertinent to their new identity as part of the Jewish people.

The reasons why the Beta Israel converted to Christianity in the nineteenth century appear to be similar to the reasons why these same people designated Felesmura, are today converting to Judaism. They appear to relate to the economic attractiveness of the proselytising or new religion, as well as the structure and belief of indigenous religion which is being evoked. The transformations appealed and appeal to a modern, yet traditional identity of ethnic autonomy found in a cultural identity which produces common membership irrespective of divisive aspirations. In practice, the conversion to Christianity offered the Beta Israel/Falasha better prospects such as education and land rights, while the so-called “return to Judaism” offers a new future, also with education, housing and social mobility, for the newly proclaimed Ethiopian Jews in a modern, Western state. While Christianity and Judaism are divided over the belief in Jesus Christ, on a practical level the conversions offer an innovative style of life while wiping the slate clear of previous statuses. The conversion to a completely new form of Judaism is also a form of “re-traditionalisation” associated with the emergence of a new identity with the Jewish people. The current transformation on the part of the Felesmura and the emergence of new religious forms are linked to the quest to bypass Christianity and the search for ethnic salience in novel form.

The moulding of the new identity in Israel as members of the Jewish people turns to a “felt” or even “imagined” antiquity of ethnicity, and the endorsement of a new ethno-history. For Israelis, Felesmura and Ethiopian Jews (whom they remember as “Falasha”)

are one and both are called by outsiders “Ethiopian Jews”. The new affiliations crystallize the “Falasha Christians” and Oritawi Beta Israel as a new ethnic group, by re- constructing for them an ethno-history which can create the new “community of history and destiny” (SMITH 1990). The process is aided by the compatibility of the indigenous religion, which contained the rudiments of Judaism, Judaic festivals, and messianic elements and beliefs. In this, they are not too different from the Shinlung the Indo-Burmese borderlands, who retained their connection between traditional religion and the new cognitive order.

Encouraged by the hope of Redemption as expounded in eschatological texts, such as in Ezekiel 37, and brought to life in contemporary times by messianic right-wing groups in Israel, the Falasha Christians, transformed into the Felesmura and then into Ethiopian Jews, are seeking the dovetailing of past and future, ethnos and nation in a formulation which defines a new community of history and destiny. This year, several thousand Felesmura, who were waiting in a compound in Gondar in the hopes of reenacting that community in Israel, succeeded in emigrating. The Jewish authorities, who were manning the Gondar camp, closed it officially. However, newspaper articles and informants are already reporting that more Felesmura are lying in wait in order to revive their old-new dream of reuniting with Israel and the Jewish people.

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