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Operation Solomon: The Daring Rescue of the Ethiopian Jews (review)

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a suburban dream rather than defer it. “*Raisin in the Sun* was the first play on Broadway to be written by an African American woman,” Smith observes (281); and to win the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, Hansberry had to beat out Tennessee Williams, Archibald MacLeish and the late Eugene O’Neill. *Visions of Belonging* devotes more space to Hansberry’s biography than to anyone else’s, for her identity was a suitable finale to the story that Smith has so craftily told. A legatee of the black left, Hansberry had actually studied with W. E. B. Du Bois in New York; and her Jewish husband, Robert Nemiroff, was so radical that the night before their wedding, they conducted a vigil to protest the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. Because of Hansberry’s apparent lesbianism as well, no one better personified the causes that were beginning to unfold by the time of her death, at the age of 34, in 1965. The ideology that Smith has so acutely dissected did not entirely evaporate, however. David Susskind, who produced the 1961 film version of *Raisin in the Sun*, opined that “the fact that Negroes move into a white neighborhood has nothing [*sic*] to do with it. It could be a play about an Italian or Jewish family and have the same meaning” (quoted on 322).

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Operation Solomon: The Daring Rescue of the Ethiopian Jews. By Stephen Spector. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. xv + 279 pp.

Stephen Spector has produced a meticulous, well-written account of the events leading up to and including the Israeli airlift of 14,310 Ethiopian Jews (also called Beta Israel) to Israel on May 24–25, 1991. Spector spent eight years researching and writing the book. He was given access to the confidential archives of the Joint Distribution Committee, a humanitarian organization which organized schools, clinics, and other social services in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa. He also interviewed many of the key actors from the Joint, the U.S. and Israeli governments, the Jewish Agency, and the American Association for Ethiopian Jewry. The book has the ring of authority, and reads like a novelistic thriller.

Spector sets Operation Solomon among numerous overlapping contexts: the Ethiopian civil war and the fall of the Mengistu regime; the backroom negotiations for arms, economic assistance, and face-saving support among Ethiopian, U.S., Israeli, and Russian government representatives; the planning and technical know-how of the Israeli Defense Forces and the Mossad; the “who is a Jew?” controversy; the coop-

eration and conflict among American Jewish defense and humanitarian organizations; the agitation by Ethiopian-Israeli civil rights groups and West Bank settlers; and the attempts to repeal the UN's "Zionism equals racism" resolution. He depicts the operation as a key moment in the Zionist narrative of "the ingathering of the exiles" and successful, if often chaotic, Israeli cooperation with the U.S. and with American Jews. Yet Spector also shows that the ingathering and cooperation narratives imply a story more harmonious than was actually the case. In many instances, he highlights unresolved competing accounts about the same events from different institutional representatives.

Because each of the actors had different agendas—even those ostensibly working toward the same goal—the road was not always smooth. The White House of George H.W. Bush, the Senate, and the State Department were not always on the same page. The Israelis and the American Jews often clashed. The narratives of the Israeli officials often differ from those of the *qessotch*, the Beta Israel's spiritual leaders. One of the most interesting examples of conflict concerns a key actor who, until now, has received little attention: Susan Pollack, the representative in Addis Ababa of the grassroots and somewhat maverick American Association for Ethiopian Jews. Pollack precipitated the crisis leading to Operation Solomon when, in February 1990, without consulting any government, she arranged to transport the majority of Beta Israel from the remote Gondar province to the capital. Within weeks the Israeli embassy became a refugee camp for thousands of Ethiopian Jews, where hunger, HIV, and tuberculosis spread rapidly, and the agricultural villagers had to confront the temptations of hard currency, alcohol, and prostitution. The Joint and the Jewish Agency were at the time furious with Pollack for bringing the Beta Israel before proper social service accommodations could be made. Yet Spector demonstrates that, while critical of Pollack in public, they nonetheless acknowledged privately that she had been able to do precisely what no elite NGO or government agency could have done—create what one calls "a fact on the ground"—and that, if it had not been for the AAEJ, the evacuation might never have taken place.

This tale of conflict and cooperation among the network of organizations working on behalf of Ethiopian Jews might be the basis for a comparative study of Jewish international politics. Spector's narrative exemplifies the ad hoc, informal structure by which political actors on international Jewish issues have usually operated—e.g., with regard to Soviet Jewry, UN reform, even the formation of the State of Israel itself. The informality of the collaboration makes it possible for each of the actors to operate independently, according to the mission of their organization, yet to participate in time-limited strategic coalitions among public and

private entities. Spector's example yields insight into the often Byzantine, delicate, and dynamic workings of this kind of politics.

His book will appeal mainly to those readers interested in history from the perspective of elites: diplomats, politicians, Jewish defense organizations, and humanitarian aid workers. Throughout, he weaves two fascinating detective stories: the first about what really happened to the thirty-five million dollars the Jewish Agency ponied up to the Mengistu government as compensation for the airlift; the second about how the Israeli government decided not to decide about the fate of the Falash Mura, the Ethiopian Jews who had converted to Christianity. Yet, along with this elite view, one would also like to know more about how members of Beta Israel themselves experienced these events.

Spector does present two anecdotes about Chomanesh, a fictional Ethiopian Jewish woman who, he says, represents a composite of the experiences of many of the Beta Israel he interviewed. Yet these tales are ultimately unsatisfying, because, as stories about a type, they carry more symbolic weight than they can bear. He also quotes a *qes* describing the evacuation as "the call of Zion . . . the call of God" (xiii), but then questions the reliability of *qes* testimony "infused with spiritual mystery" (xiii), warns that the Beta Israel "come from a tradition of speaking, shall we say, creatively" (xii), and suggests that there may have been other, less sacred, reasons for the mass exodus. Those interested in how the evacuation appeared through the eyes of its subjects will therefore have to look elsewhere.

The book's focus on the circumstances of the evacuation also precludes it from delving into the Ethiopians' subsequent experience of absorption in Israel—no doubt a book in itself—which would modify, without undermining, the triumphal celebration of ingathering told here, and would make comparison with Israel's other *aliyot* possible.

These are not really criticisms of Spector's book so much as questions for further research that the book has opened up. Spector succeeds wonderfully at his main task: his book is the most judicious and accurate record of Operation Solomon we are likely to get.

Michael Galchinsky

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Call It English: The Languages of Jewish American Literature. By Hana Wirth-Nesher. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. xv + 224 pp.

Hana Wirth-Nesher's 1990 essay "Between Mother Tongue and Native Language: Multilingualism in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*" quickly