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ETHNO-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND ASSIMILATION: FALASHAS IN AN ISRAELI IMMIGRANT ABSORPTION CENTER

I. Introduction

Social research on immigrants in Israel, especially on those of 'Oriental' (Asian and African) origin, has been quite extensive. A large number of publications highlighting the main problems of the immigration process, adjustment and integration (or 'absorption', to use the Israeli term) and their social, cultural and psychological aspects, has accumulated into a rich store of knowledge on Israel as a new society in dynamic development. Especially anthropologists have contributed much to a more detailed understanding of Israeli society in recent years (cf. Krausz 1980; Marx 1980).

Still, several important aspects of the development of the Jewish state, where assimilation, or rather amalgamation, of the various (Jewish) immigrant groups is still a dominant ideal, remain unclear or have been treated insufficiently, such as, for instance, ethnic inequality and its loci, elite formation, social tensions, emerging class distinction and immigrant policies (as has been argued by, for example, Smooha 1978 and Bernstein 1980, 1981).

The present study takes its cue from the increased relevance of ethnicity in Israel (Eisenstadt 1980). It will give attention to the problematic process of the initial social accommodation¹ of a group of immigrants with a different cultural and ethnic background (the Ethiopian Jews or Falashas) in an Immigrant Absorption Center and to the effect of this process on the idea of assimilation that these immigrants have.

A survey of the literature (see Deshen and Handelsman 1975; Cohen 1977; and Lahav 1980) reveals that Immigrant Centers have hardly received the attention of social anthropologists. These Centers nevertheless form a very interesting unit of investigation, as a micro-structure

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in which an important phase of the process of culture change and of group and individual adjustment can be seen at work, especially for them. Some reasons for the scant attention paid to developments in these Centers are perhaps: their relatively recent origin (as they were founded in the late 1960's); their inaccessibility to outsiders (that is, people not affiliated with the Jewish Agency or the Ministries involved²); and their relatively unproblematic and temporary character (as immigrants only stay here for a limited period).

In a comparative study of four Immigrant Centers, Horowitz (1977:296) has remarked that the social relations *within* the Center have their own problems, which do not, however, have any effect on the eventual integration of the immigrants concerned into society. My thesis here will be that interaction in an Immigrant Center (between representatives of the absorbing society and, in this particular case, the Falasha immigrants) does have relevance for the life of the immigrants outside the Center, and, more generally, for their ideas and expectations as regards assimilation and amalgamation. The role of the primary ethnic group may also be less transient than is often suggested (e.g., by Weiss Bar Yosef 1980).

Falashas, when they arrived in the country, had a strong desire for assimilation, that is, 'to become like the Israelis'. Their notions in this respect coincided with the meaning Yinger has recently given to the term, viz.: '... a process of boundary reduction that can occur when members of two or more societies or of smaller groups meet . . .' (Yinger 1981:249). Teske and Nelson, in a review of studies of assimilation and acculturation, have defined assimilation in more detailed, but similar terms, namely as a dynamic process which involves direct contact between groups, is unidirectional, and requires a change in values and in reference group, as well as internal change and acceptance by the out-group (Teske and Nelson 1974:365).

In practice, these are the goals of the 'absorption effort' in Israel. Although the term used here is not 'assimilation' (for which there is no adequate Hebrew word) but 'amalgamation', there is no question of the immigrants' adopting the prevailing norms, values and behavioral patterns of their new society, especially if they come from a very different cultural environment, as the Falashas do. The above definition by Teske and Nelson therefore basically applies here.

In this paper, I will argue that the emerging structure of interaction in the Falasha Immigrant Absorption Center and the different levels of conceptualization of the 'absorption context' have put up an obstacle to a smooth initial assimilation (which is an ideal shared by both immigrants and Center staff) and steered the process of interaction unintendedly in the direction of conflict and emphasis of group boundaries, thereby mobilizing ethnic group consciousness.

The second part of this paper will describe the general setting of the

Immigrant Center on the basis of the literature and my own observations (in January-October 1981). The third part will outline certain developments in the interaction of a group of Falasha immigrants³ with the absorption staff of an Immigrant Center in a southern Israeli town.

The Falashas or Ethiopian Jews are a dark-skinned ethnic group originating from the north-western Ethiopian rural areas, where they were peasants and low-status craftsmen. Their religion is Judaic, but they traditionally lack a knowledge of the Talmudic traditions. Their bond with the rest of world Jewry has only been solidly established in the present century. For ages they have defended their 'Israelite' or *Betä Israel*⁴ identity against the Christian Amhara-Tigray people in a series of bloody conflicts. As regards material culture as well as many customs they resemble the Ethiopians amongst whom they live.⁵ About 15,000 Falashas still reside in Ethiopia, and around 5,000 are in Israel. Their position in Ethiopia is very difficult, and legal emigration to Israel virtually impossible (see Jacobovici 1981 and 1983).

Many years of controversy and debate have preceded the recognition of the Falashas as Jews under the Law of Return in Israel in 1975, on the basis of an earlier religious decision by one Chief Rabbi of Israel.⁶ Only after this were they eligible to become citizens of the State (Kessler 1982:162).

II. The Immigrant Absorption Centers

The Immigrant Absorption Centers are institutions of a limited size (with a capacity of approximately 50 to 450 persons) in which immigrants to Israel may spend their first period in the new country.⁷ These Centers now form the general channel through which most immigrants enter Israeli society. Life in them certainly represents a transitional, liminal phase with specific characteristics, bridging the gap between emigration and integration.

The Centers represent an institution of immigrant absorption resulting from 'meticulous planning' (Horowitz 1977:288). Initially, they were geared to the needs of European and American immigrants with an academic background who needed a knowledge of the Hebrew language for their work in Israel as soon as possible. The officially defined objectives of these Centers were, according to Horowitz (1977):

- a. to help the head of the family acquire a working knowledge of Hebrew;
- b. to help the immigrants prepare for permanent absorption through work and housing;
- c. to promote contact between the immigrants and Israeli society.

The daily programme of these Centers was as follows: Hebrew lessons from about 8.00 a.m. until 12.30 p.m.; meetings and discussions with the staff members of the Center on matters of day-to-day life and employ-

ment, legal arrangements, educational courses and housing, visits to hospitals, government institutions, etc., and sometimes excursions to national sites in the afternoons; leisure time and time for 'cultural activities' such as attendance of courses, hobby circles, or films and lectures in the evening.

During the period of my fieldwork this schedule in fact provided the basis for activities in the Center concerned, although each Center adapts the schedule in accordance with its own experience and background. In general, more attention is given to educational and leisure activities in the afternoons and evenings. The Centers have now widened their scope, because they are no longer restricted to absorbing the immigrants for whom they were originally set up. There is now more recognition of the social 'buffer' function of these Centers for the often uprooted new immigrants they accommodate.

Various agencies participate in their running, viz. the Ministries of Education, Labour, Housing, Immigrant Absorption and Social Welfare, and the Jewish Agency, responsible for the day-to-day management.

The said Ministries all have special representatives responsible for immigrants, both in- and outside the Centers, which thus have a unique and rather complicated administrative structure, which is often confusing for the immigrants. There is such a Center in almost every Israeli town, although in the past few years only very few have run at full capacity, due to the low rate of immigration.

Immigrant families⁸ are allocated an apartment of two to three bedrooms, a kitchen and a bathroom, for which they pay no rent until they start working. Nor do they pay any electricity, water or gas rates. There are various special amenities, such as a laundry and a kindergarten. Each family receives monthly allowance according to its size. In addition, families or individuals who come as refugees with little money or few possessions are given an extra 'refugee allowance' after arrival in the Center – which also applies to the *Falasha olim* (Hebrew: immigrants).

The immigrants are expected to stay in these Centers for some 5 to 6 months for the purpose of learning the language and familiarizing themselves with institutional arrangements.

Although originally intended for western immigrants with an academic background (in the late 1960's special efforts were made to attract more western immigrants, while the immigration rate from Africa and Asia was low), the Centers came to be used for most other types of immigrants as well (Russian Jews from Georgia and the Caucasus, South Americans, East Europeans, etc.). The 'resocialization function' of the Centers thereupon became more important.

The relation between the Center staff and the inhabitants, however, has not fundamentally changed. It is one of dependence within the allocative system of immigrant support, with its own goals, means and

planning framework. The 'regime' is quite strict, though in the final instance the immigrants participate on a voluntary basis.

The above outline may indicate why an Immigrant Absorption Center is of interest: it represents an intersection of the explicit, normative institutional structure of an 'ideological' society (Zionism) with the process of adaptation of newly recruited members, who formulate their personal lives anew in the emerging pattern of social interaction. As such, the Center is a locus of identity formation with a set of dynamics of its own, as the immigrants do not start their new life as 'tabula rasa'. Now and then, articles and reports appearing in Israel show that life in these Immigrant Centers does not always proceed smoothly: the relation between staff and immigrants is often problematic and the immigrants, due to the great adjustment they have often had to make, have problems in adapting to the often bewildering new environment. Conflicts in Immigrant Centers as a rule follow a set pattern and can to a large extent be explained with reference to the structure of the institution as such and to the conditions of interaction within it; the hierarchical structure of 'absorbers' (patrons) versus 'absorbed' (clients) bears the seeds of strain within it. This is sufficiently obvious from the fact that the decisions in the Center are ultimately always taken by the staff. In some conflicts, however, additional factors connected with the ethno-cultural background of the particular immigrant population also play a role and can lead to a conflict having fairly far-reaching consequences.

III. Falashas in absorption

The relatively short-term social interaction on a micro level in the setting of a particular Immigrant Center can be seen as a series of systematic, but unplanned, actions and reactions guided by two different perceptions of the situation: that of the institutionalized structure and its representatives (the staff of the Center), and that of the 'inmates', the Falasha immigrant newcomers. Both parties have of course a different view of the wider social context and the structural conditions of the process of 'absorption' as they meet in the Immigrant Center. The evolving pattern of interaction can generate a relationship with a high degree of ambivalence and latent strain as a result of these different perceptions. Naturally, the ultimate integrative goals remain the same for both – both sides are partners in the same incorporationist framework (see Paine 1976).

On the Falasha side, the expectation of continuation of a basic group identity is important. This identity is seen in religious-ethnic terms. They came to Israel with a definite ethnic awareness, although not an ethnic consciousness (a stronger form of ethnic identification, see McKay and Lewins 1978:418).⁹ In the beginning this ethnic awareness was not mobilized; on the contrary, the Falashas set out with an extremely assimilatory attitude towards the wider society. Like the Center staff,

they wanted to forget, or at least to ignore, the very fact of their being Ethiopian. They were defined as fellow-Jews, like other immigrants, entitled to the same treatment and with the same rights and duties as any other Jewish citizen. But the Falashas also saw themselves as a special case. As a Jewish community, they had been neglected for many years by the rest of world Jewry. They were, in their own eyes, one of the oldest and most authentic Jewish communities remaining, who were true to the Mosaic (Toranic) religion¹⁰, had suffered on account of this for ages up to the present day, and had come to Israel after much hardship, so that they now felt entitled to every measure of support and understanding to help them become 'integrated' in Israeli society as full and equal Jews. The fact of their cultural difference or 'deprivation' was to play no negative role in their assimilation process. At the same time, the Falasha *olim* intended to find new fulfilment as free Jews¹¹, accepting Israeli Judaism, but using their own valued tradition and identity as a starting point. They expected to receive friendly acceptance and respect and of course decent work and a decent standard of living, as well as the serious assistance of the Israeli authorities for the rescue of their relatives and other fellow-Falashas still in Africa, where they were living in poverty and fear of persecution.

The Falasha attitude to social accommodation and assimilation acquired a somewhat ambivalent character, therefore: eager to adopt everything new, to become part of the new society and to receive full acceptance, they also adhered to their own ideas of socio-cultural continuity, family ethos, etc., and continued valuing elements of their religious-ethnic identity as the framework through which changes would have 'to make sense'.

The view of the staff workers, as representatives of the Jewish Agency and Israeli society at large, was that the Falashas needed a complete and unidirectional resocialization treatment in order to make them fit for life in modern Israeli society. The 'absorbers' *did* recognize the claims of equality of the Falasha immigrants: they tried (and are trying) to act according to the egalitarian bureaucratic absorption ideology. But they also acted on the basis of another perception: that of the 'primitiveness' or backwardness of the group. The Jewish agency had, since early 1980, devised a special 'absorption project' for the Falashas, because they were different from all the other immigrants. Various reports were distributed to staff workers, lectures were organized to prepare them and frequent policy discussions were held. A circumscribed program of treatment had to be followed. They were convinced, therefore, that the Falasha *olim* were in need of long-term 'reeducation', and expected obedience and wholehearted cooperation from them. They could not but notice the substantial backwardness of the *olim* as judged by modern standards, as these *olim* 1. came from an underdeveloped, rural small-scale society with low material and technological standards, 2. had a different inter-

pretation of religious experience and the supernatural, 3. had different notions of social life, interpersonal relations, a code of honour, etc., 4. had had their identity as 'Jews in every respect' established only recently (1975), and 5. had high expectations of their future place in Israeli society.

The Falasha immigrants therefore faced something of a dilemma: eager to give up their traditional behavioral patterns and in favor of receptive, adaptive behavior so as to be given equal standing as a community in Israel, they were nevertheless categorized as 'different', not only as new immigrants, but as still 'primitive' people. They were likewise incapable of really breaking away from their own reference group in daily life, due to the language problem and their residence in an all-Falasha Absorption Center. Their social circle was almost exclusively made up of other Falashas, contacts with other Israelis being as yet marginal and their acquaintance with them, in- and outside the Center, of a specific, patronizing or institutionalized nature. The immigrants were the clients in a relation of dependence and they knew that they were often regarded as 'primitives'. Cultural factors, their formerly altogether different way of life, problems of communication, and the lingering of past doubts and uncertainties about the Falashas as historically and religiously acceptable Jews therefore did play a role in creating a distance.¹²

The Center taken here as the location of the case study was exceptional in that it contained a homogeneous population of Falasha immigrants. It had been planned as such for at least one year. In the period of eight months that I made observations there, the Center was populated by some 480, later 350, immigrants (more than a hundred having left it prematurely).

All of them had come to Israel after a long and tortuous journey (having spent many months in a refugee camp in Africa). The majority came without any possessions (only some Ethiopian clothes and other personal belongings such as earrings, bracelets and Ethiopian cereal seeds). They had a strong sense of messianic fulfilment in having arrived in Israel, and were eager to absorb whatever Israeli society had to offer them. Obviously, they idealized their new country too much. Despite their high motivation, their condition made them of course completely dependent on support from the Center authorities. They had no clear idea of what Israeli society was like and how they would actually live there.

Planning for the absorption of Falasha immigrants was begun by the Jewish Agency in the months shortly before and coinciding with their arrival. A few Immigrant Centers were especially prepared for Falashas. The largest Center was located in a southern town and had a more or less experimental character. Here the immigrants were housed in inconspicuous four-storey apartment blocks on the western outskirts of town.

In the first year, some 480 people were housed in the Center.

The composition of the population was very uneven, as more than half of the *olim* were under 16 years of age, many children had come without a father or mother, and many families were otherwise incomplete (a result of the chaotic illegal flight from the refugee camps). At the Center, members of one family were placed together in one apartment (children, parent(s), grandparent(s), and sometimes an aunt or uncle). The families were relatively large, and an occupancy of at least two to three persons per room was common.

There was no selection and no allocation of apartments according to personal preference; neighbors were often strangers to each other, or at least were often not closely related. The population density of the Center proved later to be another problem for the immigrants, who were used to living in scattered rural homesteads, with neighbors at a convenient distance.

During the first months, the immigrants were occupied with mainly three things. First of all, they had to undergo medical examinations and treatment (as more than half of them came with diseases such as malaria or tuberculosis, had intestinal troubles and parasites, or showed signs of malnutrition or dehydration). Secondly, classes for the Hebrew lessons were formed. Attending these lessons obviously was the immigrants' main daily activity. Learning Hebrew also is a powerful means towards resocialization: the teachers do not know much about the Ethiopian cultural background of the Falashas, do not speak Amharic or Tigrinya (the languages spoken by the Falashas), and therefore have to explain everything about Israeli customs and social situations slowly. As a frame of reference, the old society of course quickly lost its importance for the Falashas.

The third task was evidently to get to know the entirely new material environment: learning how to use common gadgets and facilities such as water taps, bathrooms, gas cookers and electrical appliances, and how to handle money, where and how to shop, how to go to a bank or a post office, etc.

Familiarization with the wider Israeli society also began after some time by visiting important national sites and institutions, and introducing children in schools (first in separate classes to study Hebrew, later mixed with other children). The adults were moreover introduced in a local Sephardic synagogue.

All this comprised what we may call the first phase of assimilation, which was of a rather more instrumental nature. It effected changes in manifest behavior as a result of the direct, guided contact and the planned program of change, but did not yet lead to 'internal change' and 'change in values' (cf. Teske and Nelson 1974:365) or to what Yinger (1981:250) has called identification (of a more psychological-cognitive nature). This is not to separate the two processes of instrumental and

psychological assimilation, because obviously the two are interconnected and are simultaneously present from the start. But they receive a different emphasis at different stages of the process: in a later phase, the emphasis will be more on the psychological aspect of assimilation – after the newcomers have familiarized themselves with the main elements of and strategies in the material environment.

To see how this first phase was followed up and eventually led to a break, two spheres of interaction in the context of the Immigrant Center will have to receive closer attention: (a) that of the ‘absorbers’ and the immigrants, and (b) that of the immigrants among themselves.

Beginning with (a), the notion of social exchange can be of use in bringing out the main characteristics of interaction in the Center. Blau speaks of social exchange as covering ‘... actions that are contingent on rewarding reactions from others and that cease when these expected reactions are not forthcoming’ (Blau 1964:6). This definition is sufficiently wide to cover the many kinds of exchange not directly concerned with commodities or items of material value. The mode of exchange was more incorporationist, as defined by Paine (1976), as opposed to transactionalist. The relationship between the two parties (staff and immigrants) was dominated by notions like value consensus, cooperation, adaptation, and integrative behavior and loyalty.

The Falashas found themselves in a situation in which the ‘resources’ exchanged were basically material rewards and provisions (in fact, everything necessary for their subsistence), social assistance (i.e. their provision with the ‘social tools’ necessary for Israeli society) and other absorption activities (teaching them Hebrew, giving them religious information, etc.) to help them realize the desired aim of equality and integration in Israeli society.

The Falashas would then reciprocate with an attitude of obedience and acceptance of, as well as active participation in, the resocialization programme at the Center. It was, in fact, a moral exchange, in which values and norms regarding the social order and social behavior of the two parties were central, within the framework of a ‘higher loyalty’ (Paine 1976:71), i.e. the incorporative framework of the Absorption Center with its common aim for both staff and immigrants. But from the start, there was a certain ambivalence about this among the immigrants. They had no clear conception of what was expected in return in the interaction on a more concrete level, or of how to express themselves. The communication problem played a role in this (lack of Hebrew, as well as cultural misunderstandings). There were Falasha translators, but these were few in number and not always satisfactory. The ‘absorbers’ expected a behavioral consensus to follow as a matter of course; the immigrants, however, were not sure about its nature and content and were confused by many aspects of the ‘modernity’ of Israel, as well as by the future of their identity as a ‘black’ group among

'European' Israelis, as they saw it.

As regards point (b), the relations among the Falasha immigrants themselves were not problematic during the first months, as most of their energy went into overcoming their culture shock and into attempts at initial adjustment. At a later stage, however, relations among them became more strained. Actually, it was in this sphere that a conflict arose.

The majority of the immigrants originated from the northern Ethiopian province of Tigray and spoke Tigrinya; a minority came from the Gondär and Wälqait districts in Bägemdir-Semien province and spoke mainly Amharic. The Tigray Falashas (about 15% of the total Falasha population in Ethiopia) had formed a rather self-contained rural community without any strong ties with the other Falashas living in the southern and southwestern districts (from whom they were separated by the Täkkaze river). Despite the fact that the way of life of both groups, as peasants and low-status craftsmen living in small villages, had been basically similar, the Tigray Falashas considered themselves as 'stronger, more independent, tougher' (living under more difficult conditions) than the Gondär Falashas. Some observers felt that the Tigray were 'less Judaic' than the southern Falashas, but this is not certain. In any case they appear to have been more acculturated to and integrated with the Ethiopian Christian/Muslim population and culture. It is important to note that the Tigray Falashas did not benefit substantially from support in connection with the relief and educational efforts which were intermittently undertaken by world Jewry in the past century. All help (e.g. loans, schools, religious objects and instruction, funds for a synagogue) had been channelled to (a proportion of) the Gondär Falashas and had been supervised and managed by a Gondär Falasha, Ephraim Solomon,¹³ who, according to the Tigray Falashas, had not seriously regarded the Tigrays as Jews. The cause for their mutual hostility is said to go back to several specific incidents, one of which is especially often mentioned. One Tigray Falasha studying at a school established by Solomon with funds from abroad had died on his way home as a result of the bite of a poisonous snake on his long journey on foot. This would not have happened if the man had been given the money to travel by bus instead, Tigray Falashas said. Some informants stated, in line with old Ethiopian notions about feuds: 'Since then, we have had a blood quarrel'. This may be exaggerated, but at any rate there has been a lasting conflict between the two groups which has not really been straightened out. Other disputes have further complicated the relationship in the course of time. An outburst of open hostility, however, had been prevented by geographical distance and by the effects of marriage alliances between the two (although there was no patterned reciprocity in these).

Now even in the Absorption Center suspicion arose when it appeared that the three Falasha *vatikim* (the Hebrew term for 'veterans', people

who have been settled in the country for several years and are 'experienced') who were employed as interpreters and assistants were Gondär Falashas and relatives of Solomon.

Their leadership role was resented (while the staff of the Center did not yet recognize the importance of this background). Relations became very strained when in September-October 1980 the rabbi working in the Center as a religious teacher (a Gondär Falasha rabbi, who was the first Falasha to be ordained as an Orthodox Rabbi in Israel) appeared to be giving preferential treatment in his religious instruction and granting of legal certificates (or identity cards¹⁴) to Gondär-Wälqait Falasha immigrants. He placed the Tigray and these other Falashas in separate groups for religious instruction and preparation for the ritual of 'conversion' (see note 6). After this ritual the candidates were recommended for registration with the Ministry of the Interior so that they might receive their identity cards. The rabbi's motives later appeared to be of an internal political nature aimed at restricting the Tigray electorate for the coming election of new leaders of the Organization of Ethiopian Jews in Israel. The Tigray *olim* then revolted against this.

In this situation of crisis they expected understanding and assistance from the staff of the Immigrant Center, but this was hardly forthcoming. The conflict entered a violent phase during the stormy electoral meeting of the Organization of Ethiopian Jews in November 1980. No new leadership was elected in the end, as a result of various obstructionist tactics, and when insults were shouted by Gondär Falashas at Tigray Falashas and vice versa, the meeting ended in a massive fight in which 20 people were injured and some 8 arrested and detained for 24 hours by the police. Furniture in the meeting hall was smashed up, and so was the Organization of Ethiopian Jews.

This split the entire Falasha population, the newly arrived immigrants as well as the *vatikim*, in two. Especially youngsters came to violent blows on the Immigrant Center premises; in these conflicts blood flowed and some of the combatants had to be treated in hospital. Thus, friendships between youths of the two groups came to an end, families began to quarrel openly, Hebrew instruction classes were split and visitors to the Center who were of Gondär origin were harassed. A very serious development was the violent expulsion of Tigray women married to Gondär men (either in Ethiopia or in the refugee camps) by relatives. Some time later the opposite also happened. This had a strong symbolic impact.

At this stage of rapid escalation of the conflict, the attitude of the staff was of key importance, as the main developments took place within the Center. Characteristic was the lack of an appropriate response of the staff. The police were called in several times, but no arrests were made, contrary to what was expected by many Falashas. This hesitant attitude again was interpreted as negative by the *olim*, both Tigray and Gondär-

Wälqait, because they were left to fight it out themselves as if there were no standards or rules by which to solve the problems in some other way, with the assistance of people who were there to help them become integrated in Israeli society.

The combined effect of the conflict and the lack of a decisive response on the part of the staff caused the first severe 'disjunction' (cf. Paine 1976:76) in the absorption process as conceived of in the Center: the common, normative basis of interaction for a common cause slowly fell away. The Falashas could no longer see themselves as partners of the staff in a common undertaking in every respect. The result was a kind of reversion to their own behavioral code and a greater orientation towards their own group, constituting at the same time a protest and the tentative re-affirmation of a boundary.

This was especially the case with the Tigray immigrants. In their eyes, the conflict could only have taken the turn it did because of the lack of fairness and firmness of the staff (in appointing Gondär Falashas as their 'spokesmen' (as interpreters)) and tolerating the Falasha rabbi's activities.

As a result, the prestige and legitimacy of the absorption staff as a responsible and capable partner in the integration efforts greatly diminished and confidence in it was lost.

The Tigray Falashas rejected all further dealings with the Falasha rabbi (who had been appointed by the Chief Rabbis of Israel to deal with religious matters among the immigrants) and demanded a 'white rabbi',¹⁵ which was evidence of the continuing wish to adapt to Israeli mores.

But this demand was only met some months later, after a fruitless meeting with a Chief Rabbi, and after a period in which there occurred such further developments as strikes by immigrants boycotting staff activities and Hebrew lessons and the departure (actually flight) of nearly all the Gondär and Wälqait Falashas from the Center after continued fighting.

In the wake of this conflict, the resentment against the program of religious instruction (deemed necessary because the Falashas had no link with the Talmudic tradition and its many rules and injunctions) also rose. The reasons for this were several: a. many, especially older, Falasha immigrants began to doubt the validity of the idea of religious education itself, noticing the 'secular' behavior of most other Israelis. Especially the perceived 'desecration of the Shabat', by quarrelling, smoking, driving, playing football, etc. was frowned upon. All this had been inconceivable in Ethiopia; b. the fact that one rabbi who came to instruct them on religious ritual on one occasion showed that he possessed a gun was a shock for them – in their opinion it was almost a sacrilege for a religious leader (like their priest in Ethiopia) to carry a weapon; and c. it was very disappointing for them that the Chief Rabbi

failed to satisfactorily answer the vital questions about ritual and belief which the Falashas had asked him at a meeting. A list of written questions had not been officially answered, either.

When this resentment became more articulated, it increased the tendency towards withdrawal and particularism which had already developed after the conflicts with the Center staff. Concrete expressions of this were, for example, the increased wearing of Ethiopian clothes (*shämma*, *nätchala* or *qämis*), the taking up of Ethiopian handicraft work as a day-time occupation (often instead of Hebrew lessons), a reversion to the Ethiopian style of cooking (discouraged by absorption workers as being unsuitable for young children), non-cooperation in social activities organized by staff workers, and having more 'Ethiopian-style' wedding parties, i.e., without an Israeli band, not in a wedding hall, like those of all other Israelis, and with Ethiopian food. (Whether in the further course of the emergence of this ethnic consciousness, other, more lasting Falasha social characteristics were reverted to cannot be said at this stage, although the forced separation of 'mixed' Tigray-Gondari couples (mentioned above), the allusions to a feud, and the maintenance of extended family ties which I observed could point in this direction.)

The few elderly Falashas who pleaded for a reconciliation with the staff and other *olim* had no success. At a later stage, one Falasha (originally from the Gondär area, but who had lived in Tigray as a teacher for many years and had in the previous conflict been considered as 'one of them') was labelled a 'traitor' ('... on the side of the whites', see note 15) even by the Tigray *olim* (he was working as a *madrich* (guide, translator) appointed by the Jewish Agency in the Center). Suddenly his Falasha origins (i.e. his descent from an established family) were called into question. Later on he was physically threatened and then severely beaten up. The reasons the attackers gave for this was that he had familiarized too much with the Center staff and had put the immigrants in a bad light. This attack can be seen as the culmination of the process of dissociation of the immigrants from the Center staff and from the idea of 'absorption' as defined by the latter. Group solidarity increased and a boundary was drawn. Immigrants emphasized that '... they cannot push us around, we are a strong people with an old, genuine religion... We did not come here to be treated like this...' and '... one day we will show our strength'.

We see how as a result of the recourse to individual as well as collective non-institutionalized reactions to the tensions in the Center, interaction – and therefore communication – to a large extent broke down, and how the validity of the established framework of exchange, within the allocative framework of the Immigrant Center, was questioned. The staff could no longer expect 'reciprocation' in the spirit of duty and obligation (supposed to be at the basis of this incorporative

context) from the immigrants.

A temporary truce was only attained after all the Gondär-Wälqait *olim* had left the Center, the Falasha *madrich* who had been beaten up had been dismissed, and one influential spokesman of the Tigray Falashas (who had much prestige among them because of his role in rescue efforts in Africa,¹⁶ his relatively good education and his family background) had finally been accepted by the Jewish Agency as a mediator and *madrich*. He could now be regarded as an intermediary (or 'broker') between the staff and the immigrants, who both placed confidence in him. The immigrants now hardly needed to move outside their own domain – his agency helped to maintain the façade of a 'closed system', which was what the immigrants wanted at that stage.

With this, a new phase of interaction had begun, in which the staff, and through them Israeli institutions (such as the Chief Rabbinate, the various Ministries, etc.), had to show greater consideration for the wishes, feelings and cultural peculiarities of the Falashas. It may perhaps be said that the incorporationist framework was now gradually replaced by a more transactionalist one, which is to say that there was now a greater recognition of a certain distance, of a difference in conceptions of similar goals, and a reduced sense of consensus. In this new situation the former peace could not, however, be restored. The broker now had more influence on the immigrants than the staff, because he forced them to be more or less obedient to his own ideas. Direct communication had become more difficult.

This became evident in a new conflict around the transfer of the *olim* from the Immigrant Center to ordinary houses in several nearby towns. They refused (mainly at the instigation of the broker) to leave the Center, as they disagreed with the manner of their settlement (placing Falasha families close together in a few apartment blocks instead of scattered), and wanted to choose their own places to live and work or to live near particular relatives. A few months passed before they began moving, after much pressure and the threat of stronger sanctions by the Immigrant authorities.

The strain between Tigray and Gondär Falashas did not abate, either. In view of the separatist developments sketched above, there is a possibility that two separate Ethiopian Jewish communities may emerge, each with its own organization and social patterns, and each developing its own kind of sub-identity.

This will hold especially for the Tigray Falashas. It will be of interest to see in what sphere this difference will express itself – in the political (organized interest groups) or the religious one (the two groups often playing out their conflict by reference to the (lack of) 'Jewish character' of the other party). The arrival (the year after the conflict) of an old Falasha priest from Tigray with some religious books (including an *Orit* (or Torah) in Ge'ez, the old Ethiopic religious language) was an event of

great importance for the Tigray Falashas, upon which the Gondär Falashas looked with a mixture of condescension and jealousy.¹⁷

But much of the further course of this process will depend on developments in the other Falasha immigrant Centers, those now existing and those to come. Several of these were set up after the one discussed here. They may be expected to have learned from the experiences of the first Center.

We cannot yet say, therefore, whether the behavioral development on the basis of ethnic consciousness and loyalty will become the rule and will culminate in a form of institutionalization. Socio-economic factors connected with the wider society will probably play an important role here, for instance the question whether the immigrants will soon find work and whether or not they will be concentrated in a few lower-status occupations, whether they will be socially and geographically dispersed, and will not become stigmatized (the latter phenomenon perhaps reinforced by lingering religious doubts). As I noted earlier, it is to be doubted whether the difficulties of initial assimilation sketched above are only relevant to social relations within the Immigrant Center and will have no effect on eventual integration and assimilation in Israeli society. Not to doubt this would be an underestimation of the social effects of *group* migration and absorption. Disappointment in the process of boundary reduction (Yinger) at the group level may lead to an emphasis being placed on elements of (ethnic) group identity, which may fulfil an instrumental role for immigrants coping with a strange environment. Furthermore, ethnicity or ethnic identity does not simply 'disappear' in such a context.

It is illustrative that previous Falasha immigrants who came mainly on an individual basis, some 8-10 years ago, do not attach as much importance to their Ethiopian provenance and have experienced far fewer problems in their (individual) 'absorption' – they were never with a Falasha group in an Immigrant Center.

Thus, my conclusion is that the pattern of interaction between the *olim* and the wider society, which is now psychologically anchored to the developments in the Center, will make it difficult for them, once they will have left the Center, to adjust (let alone to assimilate) entirely in accordance with the ideological tenets of their new society. Indeed, as a result of the confrontation between the *olim* and the Israeli absorption context, original ethnic characteristics are assuming unexpected salience, contrary to planning objectives and to the Falashas' own initial preferences. In this sense, there is no 'escape' from ethnicity.

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and ethnicity among the Falashas in Israel. Fieldwork was carried out for one year in 1980-1981.

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NOTES

- 1 I am using this as a general term to indicate the overall way in which a certain more or less homogeneous group of immigrants from a certain country comes to terms with its new social environment: in other words, the first adjustment that its members make to it.
- 2 The Jewish Agency is the Israeli branch of the World Zionist Organization, and is responsible for immigrant matters (such as assistance with immigration to Israel and 'absorption' in Israel).
- 3 The term Falasha is commonly used in the scholarly literature on the subject, and will also be used here, mainly for the sake of convenience. It is probably an 'outsider' term; most Falashas in Israel prefer to be referred to as 'Ethiopian Jews'.
- 4 The Falashas in Ethiopia always stress their identity as *Esra'elotch* (= Israelites) or *Betä Israel* (House of Israel).
- 5 Ethnographic studies of the Falashas in Ethiopia are rare. The two most important ones are those by Krempel (1972) and Schoenberger (1975), both of which are unpublished dissertations, however.
- 6 The then Sephardic Chief Rabbi Ovadiah Yossef issued a *psak din* on the Jewishness of the Falashas in 1972, although this was not made public until several years later. In 1975 the Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren concurred with the view of Rav Yossef that the Falashas were Jews who had to be rescued from assimilation in Ethiopia (on the basis of the idea that they were a remnant of the lost Israelite tribe of Dan, which had lost close contact with world Jewry). The Government decision to recognize the Falashas as Jews was not a religious but a civic one, with a view to according them potential citizenship. The decision of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel (not the highest authority in Jewish religious matters in general) was not accepted by all orthodox circles in- and outside Israel (although it is less well-known, even among the Orthodox, that, once the Falashas have immigrated, they have to undergo a symbolic conversion (Hebrew: *giyur le chumra*) to become 'Jews in every respect' in the *Halachic* (i.e. Jewish religious law) sense).
Here I want to note as well that one of the greatest and most respected Jewish religious authorities, Rav Moshe Feinstein of New York, was also quoted as '... praying constantly for the safety of all Jews, especially those in Ethiopia ... Of course all Jews should join in whatever way they can to aid the Falashas, be this aid material or spiritual' (quoted in American Association for Ethiopian Jews, Information Paper no. 7, February 1980).
- 7 This of course does not apply to the more well-to-do or occupationally specialized immigrants who manage independently to find a job and a place to live within a relatively short time. After all, a stay in a Center is optional.
- 8 Single immigrants without any family receive a room in an Immigrant Hostel; they fall outside the scope of this description.
- 9 In their important article of 1978, McKay and Lewins define two types of ethnic identification (on the individual level of analysis): *ethnic awareness* ('An individual knows (s)he possesses an ethnic trait(s) which is no more meaningful than his or her other cultural, physical, social or territorial characteristics') and *ethnic consciousness* ('An individual possesses an ethnic trait(s) which assumes considerable importance

- vis-à-vis other personal characteristics to the extent that ethnic identification can be the mode of identification'); see McKay and Lewins 1978:418.
- 10 They had no knowledge of the Talmudic rabbinic traditions and literature, but were proud to 'practise the commandments of the *Orit*' (Ge'ez for *Torah*). See Kessler 1982 for further information.
 - 11 Until then, in Ethiopia, they had not used the word Jew (Amharic: *Ayhud*) to refer to themselves.
 - 12 An indication of this was perhaps precisely the excessive zeal of the staff in refusing to give any significance to the fact that the immigrants were Ethiopian (which meant that certain problems were insufficiently recognized), or their over-protective, patronizing stance, with which the Falashas felt uncomfortable or to which they took offense.
 - 13 This is a pseudonym. Its bearer had studied in Jewish schools in Europe and was familiar with Rabbinic Judaism. He had also worked with an Ethiopian Government Ministry for many years.
 - 14 Entitling the holders to, for example, voting rights, also for their own legal organization, a larger financial allowance, a declaration of health, and the right to look for work.
 - 15 By which they meant an Israeli, non-Falasha rabbi. The word used in Amharic or Tigrinya was *frändj*, meaning 'stranger', 'European', 'white non-Ethiopian'. This was rendered in Hebrew as *lawan*, white.
 - 16 The Falashas in the Center had all come to Israel via a secret and difficult emigration route.
 - 17 The traditional religious outlook and customs of the Falashas may in future years also be emphasized in opposition to the religious customs of the other Israelis, for whose religious observance most Falashas have no high regard, in view of the perceived contrast between the proclaimed norms of the Rabbinic establishment and actual practice. But of course the scope for the expression of a specific 'Falasha religiosity' is extremely limited.

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