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Ethnic Trajectories in Israel

Comparing the “Bené Israel” and “Beta Israel” Communities, 1950–2000

Jon G. Abbink

Abstract. – In this article a comparative study is presented of the Indian and the Ethiopian Jews in Israel, immigrant communities that went through similar experiences of integration and accommodation in Israel, despite the time lag in their arrival. Elements of their history and sociocultural background in the countries of origin are discussed in order to explain the emergence and status of ethnic identity in a complex new society with a shared background ideology of integration (Zionism). An assessment is made of the (perceived) initial religious and social marginality of the two groups as it may have interacted with their social “careers” and group status. The socioeconomic structure of Israeli society has contributed to “reproducing ethnicity.” The analysis suggests that the “Indian” and “Ethiopian” Jewish subidentities are now well-established in Israel, illustrating that the cultural content of “Jewishness” or Jewish identity is quite diverse. [*Israel, Indian Jews, Ethiopian Jews, ethnic identity, multiculturalism*]

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1 Introduction

Apart from the conflict with Arab countries and the Palestinians not accepting its existence, the state of Israel has, since 1948, had internal problems with the integration of Jewish immigrant groups

of various origins. Critical reassessments of the long-dominant sociological perspective on social integration or “absorption” of these groups in Israel (e.g., the “Eisenstadt school”) have made it clear that ethnic diversity and tensions now visible were already long present under the surface. Tensions and conflicts with ethnic referents have only gained a belated recognition in Israeli social science (since the late 1960s). At present, the study of “ethnicity” among Jewish groups has become not only fashionable but mandatory. There are both political-economic and cultural reasons for the (re)emergence of ethnicity itself. What makes the Israeli case interesting in a comparative perspective is that while the postmodern condition of the resurgence and institutionalization of cultural diversity without an overarching “normative” framework is general, in Israel the Zionist idea is still the commonly accepted rationale of state and society among most political parties, Jewish citizens, and immigrants.¹

My aim in this paper is not so much to reiterate these general points,² but to take it as a given in a comparative survey of two ethnic communities (in Hebrew: *edot*, sg.: *edah*) in contemporary Israeli-Jewish society, the Indians and the Ethiopians, and

1 Despite its being under fire from certain Jewish ultra-orthodox religious groups and, on the other end of the spectrum, from a disenchanted “secular” young generation.

2 See, e.g., Ayalon et al. 1985; Weingrod 1985; Ben-Rafael and Sharot 1991; Goldschneider 1996.

to search for reasons explaining the (re)construction of their "ethnic identity" in Israel. In trying to account theoretically for phenomena of ethnicity it is no longer productive to pit the "primordialist" and the "mobilizationist" positions against each other or dissolve them into a "constructionist" paradigm. If ethnicity is seen as a kind of shared, cultural interpretation of descent – i.e., an extended notion of kinship among a group of people –, then it is obvious that the idea of situationality is crucial. A dynamic and processual approach must be followed in accounting for ethnicity and identity formation. It can, however, be easily recognized that some social conditions leave much more room for ethnic expression and its "primordialization" than others. Some external criteria are often seized upon as essential (skin colour, language, diet, dress codes, religion). As we know, assimilation or integration are hardly ever processes that erase all traces of ethnocultural diversity or identity. This applies especially to people who migrated for other than purely economic reasons, and this also holds for most Jewish immigrants to Israel. The impact of "embodied" historical and cultural factors of group experience in the country of origin on group identification in Israel has only become fully clear in recent years. "Multiculturalism" certainly exists in Israel – even though there is no accepted definition of the term – and Jewish ethnicity, in terms of a (sometimes only nominal) religious culture and idea of descent, is still assumed as the cultural background of most groups.³

Some years ago, the anthropologist H. Goldberg (1985: 180) rightly noted the lack of a concept of culture as a critical variable in studies of ethnic phenomena and "absorption" in Israel, as evident, e.g., in the lack of recognition of "Jewishness" as a cultural category (181). A more or less uniform, culture-free idea of Jewish identity was long the underlying premise of the Israeli "absorption model" on the basis of which all immigrants would have to be "processed," while it also delineated the basic paradigm for sociological reflection upon the process. The ideological assumptions of this were submitted to critical scrutiny by many authors since the early 1980s.⁴ It is to the historico-cultural aspects of "Jewishness" as a category that I wish to draw attention with a comparison of two *edot* in Israel that long remained "marginal" in the public view: the Bené Israel *Indian* Jews and the Beta

Israel *Ethiopian* Jews. These groups have different histories, but share some aspects of their structural position and group identity in Israeli society: a) their "stigmatization" as dark-skinned, "different" Jewish groups, outside the mainstream of Jewish history and accepted only after a long struggle; b) their image of being socially "problematic" *edot* that are allegedly "hard to understand" by other Israelis; c) their relatively low-rank social position in society.

It may be that the problem of the "marginality" and lack of acceptance of these two communities in the Israeli mainstream has now, formally and within the context of social interaction in Israel, been declared a thing of the past (see below). But a retrospective analysis of their position may be useful to demonstrate the force of: 1. historical-cultural factors in defining varieties of "Jewishness", as related to an embodied, cultural style; 2. the religious power structure in Israel, 3. the problematic institutional approaches to "absorption" in Israel.

Such a comparison may also be used to underline the *interaction* of mobilizationist and primordialist aspects. The latter aspects like language, physical appearance, shared enculturation, and values cannot be created out of nothing. Cultural representations and practices concerning these aspects, as evident in, e.g., perception and presentation of self, behavioural codes, socialization of children and ritual, have an experiential basis and are not only the result of construction or political manipulation (cf. Van Londen and de Ruijter 1999: 70 for a recent restatement of this point). These cultural representations found among immigrant groups are transmitted in the new country. If one defines "culture" as a dynamic and constructed ideational system of shared, often tacit (Abbink 1992: 101) and partly embodied meanings, one recognizes that in the case of the two groups to be treated here these representations relate to the construct "Jewishness" as collective self-image and as lived practice. While "culture" should not be reified and does not exist as a bounded unit of thought or behaviour, I argue that divergent ideas and practices of Jewish identity are an important part of the cultural identity of Indian and Ethiopian immigrants, also in Israel. They represent in a way a reinvention of "tradition" and are a valued repository of meaning for both groups. How this has come about is the subject of this article.

3 Though even here there are growing doubts: many of the (supposedly Jewish) Russian immigrants who came to Israel after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 are not Jewish

4 Cf. Bernstein 1980, 1981; Swirsky 1981; Dominguez 1989.

2 Backgrounds: Jews in India and Ethiopia

I start from the assumption that both *edot* are "subethnic" groups within Jewish Israeli society. Both the Ethiopian and the Indians share a specific cultural interpretation of belonging and descent (fictive or not) and a certain social-historical style of behaviour, variably expressed in language, religion, kinship practices and ceremonies. In many interaction situations they identify themselves as sharing this group interpretation and style. This awareness implies the existence of certain sociopsychological referents (sometimes real, sometimes only remembered or imagined) as an element of ethnic identity. Part of the argument here will be that these referents have, in the cases to be treated, retained their function, in that they have been transmitted or reinvented through the *edah*-idea of "Jewishness" in Israel. I then claim that there are limits to mobilizational or constructionist views on ethnicity, in that behavioural elements and embodied practices long hold their relevance and have given rise to a cultural style that does not dissolve in new conditions but are often *produced* by them. The "situationality" of ethnicity is a fact but it can no longer be adduced as a convincing *explanation*, because it does not really account for *how* people make choices, and *what* choices they can at all make. There is need for a new theory of embodied social practice and of the (re)production of ethnocultural styles based on historical referents.

Bené Israel and the Beta Israel came to Israel with a cultural personality and a core of group symbols and value orientations, often religiously defined. In fact, more than the immigrant authorities and others in Israel were prepared to admit (either in the 1950s and 1960s, when most of the Indians came, or in the 1980s and 1990s, when the Ethiopians arrived), the immigrants aimed at retaining these symbols and values relating to their Jewish faith and culture as they saw they had kept them, as a minority in a non-Jewish environment. They expected their values and identity to be "fulfilled" in the context of a Jewish society where they were no longer a (Jewish) minority.

The differences in subethnic group identification between Ashkenazi⁵ Israelis and Middle Eastern Israelis have often been emphasized (e.g., Ayalon et al. 1985; Ben-Rafael and Sharot 1991). The latter value their Jewishness (e.g., in "Moroccan" or "Kurdish" or "Iraqi" form) above their

Israeliness; among the Ashkenazi it is the other way around. This is explained with reference to the much stronger idea of (cultural) continuity that the Middle Easterners, as Jews, cherished (or tried to cherish, as far as possible) after their immigration to the Jewish state, while the Ashkenazi groups were more secular-oriented. A similar thing happened with the Indians and the Ethiopians. They are both much more different from the Ashkenazis than from the Middle Easterners/"Orientals" (*edot hamizrach*) in matters of Jewish identity. First a sketch of the historical outlines of Indians and Ethiopians is needed.

2.1 India

The origins of the Bené Israel⁶ (as opposed to that of the other Indian Jews: the Cochins and the Baghdadis) are unclear. There is no written or other evidence on the point in time when the Bené Israel came to be settled in the Konkan area of Western India, near Bombay, or when they emerged as a distinct group. But the folk-legend of origin is important. The Bené Israel are said to have descended either from refugees from ancient Israel (Samaria), after the Assyrian conquest (8th century BCE), or from a later migrant group. Part of these Israelite ancestors arrived near the Konkan coast, where they were shipwrecked in 175 BCE. Only seven men and seven women survived. They were received by the local Hindus. The bodies of the other passengers, washed ashore, were buried nearby. Two mounds are said to contain the graves of these victims. The Bené Israel ancestors settled in the villages and took up employment mainly in oil pressing. Their "caste name" later became Shanwar Telis (lit.: "oilmen [not working on] Saturday").

There are some minor variations of this legend but they are not substantial (cf. Weil 1982: 167–169; see also Weil 1996: 302 f.). The story shows strong similarity with the origin myth of the local Chitpavan Hindus (cf. Strizower 1971: 16). It is important to note that the Bené Israel were more or less incorporated in the local caste system, although they were strictly speaking "out of caste," because not of Hindu belief. However, from their origin myth it is clear that the Bené Israel, while

5 An European-Western identity, going back to differences in ritual tradition with Sephardi/Middle Eastern communities.

6 The account of the Bené Israel is chiefly based on the publications of Schifra Strizower and especially of Shalva Weil (1977a, b, c, 1982, 1996), and on interviews in 1982 and 1987. I apologize to her if I might not do justice to the details and interpretations in her work.

having established, with a strong and oft-repeated emphasis, an irrefutable claim to Israelite descent from the "lost Ten Tribes," their outlook and status were equally shaped with reference to Hindu notions and social concepts. They never called themselves "Yehudi" (Jews), however. Until the 18th century they lived in isolation from other Jewish communities.⁷ The Bené Israel⁸ had lived as "Toranic" Jews unfamiliar with the Oral Law (Talmud). They had no Hebrew religious texts, knew no Hebrew except the important Shema prayer (a statement of belief), had no strong religious or other leaders, and did not celebrate all the common Jewish religious festivals. They thus "deviated" from mainstream Judaism in belief, ritual, and cultural orientation. Around that time they were contacted by other (Indian) Jews from Cochín, among them the trader David Rahabi (1644–1726), who initiated a process of religious reform. This also led to outsiders (Yemeni Jews) taking on some leadership positions. After 1750, the Bené Israel began to move to the city of Bombay, and gradually some Bené Israel emerged who made their mark in the wider society (Weil 1996: 309 f.).

Important is that in their formative period the Bené Israel were isolated from other Jews.⁹ Absence of anti-Jewish prejudice and of discrimination (Weil 1996: 313) caused them to acculturate into Hindu society to a remarkable extent. They were indeed "Indians among the Indians," but only of Jewish faith.

2.2 Ethiopia

The Beta Israel¹⁰ have also an obscure origin, at least from the Eurocentric point of view. They have no central, dominant origin myth comparable to that of the Bené Israel, but they also claim descent from the Israelites of the Bible. Various stories were presented to outsiders, e.g., descent from the firstborn Israelites who accompanied Menilik

(the legendary son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba) back to Ethiopia in the 9th century BCE, or descent from Israelites coming from Egypt (either after the Exodus, or after the destruction of the first Temple in 586 BCE). More recently reference was also made to descent from the "lost tribe of Dan." Neither of these claims to ancient origin can be refuted.¹¹ The Beta Israel or "Falashas" lived in the northwestern highlands of Ethiopia and were reputed to have their own kingdom in the Middle Ages. Since the 14th century, they fought a long series of wars against the emerging Christian empire. They were finally vanquished and reduced to a state of servitude. They lost their land rights and were forced to take up despised crafts like smithing and pottery, and later building and weaving. They came to form an (involuntary) occupational caste (cf. Quirin 1998). The Beta Israel maintained no demonstrable contacts with other Jews until the mid-nineteenth century. They thought that they were "the only Israelites left in the world". When the adoption of the name "Beta Israel" occurred is not known, but it dates at least from the 15th century. There was a clear religious opposition to the dominant Orthodox-Christian Amhara and Tigray peoples, but culturally and socially they strongly resembled them. They were kept – and kept themselves – apart and a boundary of mutual tension and suspicion was maintained well into the 20th century. The Beta Israel lived in small villages, working as tenant-peasants and craftsmen and practising a Toranic Judaism, based on the Orit or Pentateuch (in the Ge'ez translation). They knew no Hebrew, no Jewish Oral Law, and had incorporated part of the religious customs of the old Agaw culture of the Ethiopian highlands. The Beta Israel were only contacted by a French Jew, the Orientalist scholar Joseph Halévy, in the 1860s. In the opinion of other Jews, their claim to Jewish identity was deemed more problematic than that of the Bené Israel.

2.3 Similarities and Differences of History and Culture: The Indian and Ethiopian Jews vis-à-vis the Other Jews

1. For ages, in fact until their immigration to Israel in the 1970s and 1980s, the Beta Israel remained a village-dwelling peasant-craftsmen community; a powerless, socially rather immobile community. They were only marginally touched by Jewish

7 Though perhaps the famous Jewish sage Maimonides referred to them in a letter at the end of the 12th century (see Strizower 1974: 865)

8 According to some Bené Israel, the name "Bené Israel" (= Children of Israel) was adopted sometime in the Middle Ages of Muslim India in order to avoid persecution as "Yehudis", i.e., "Jews" (cf. Strizower 1971: 18)

9 They apparently neither had links with the Jews who came to Western India (e.g., to Surat) after the arrival of the Portuguese and the establishment of the Mughal empire in the early 16th century (cf. Fischel 1973: 152 f.)

10 Lit "House of Israel" Fieldwork among the Ethiopian Jewish community was done in the mid-1980s

11 Nor confirmed See for an analysis of the matter Abbink 1991

"missionaries" since the beginning of the 20th century.¹² Some Beta Israel were assisted and educated by the pro-Beta Israel activist Jacques Faitlovitch (in the 1920s and '30s; cf. Messing 1982: 62 f.) and in the 1950s also some Israel-educated local teachers (e.g., of Hebrew) in some villages near Gondar, but they only reached a small portion of the community.

The Bené Israel on the other hand, had left their rural milieu already in the second half of the 18th century, when they came to Bombay. They became an urban population, acquired a better education (first from British missionaries, who also stimulated a religious revival among them), and strengthened their contacts with other Jews. In later years they were able to associate themselves with the British colonial authorities, who accorded them a privileged position in the administration. They became successful soldiers, clerks, teachers, administrators. Indian Jews in Israel often stated that they were "clerk caste" in India, a relatively good social position. This "patronage" relationship with the British came to an end in 1947.

2. The Bené Israel were connected with world Jewry (through the Cochin Jews, cf. Strizower 1971: 35, 40) relatively early: in the 1720s. This was already before they moved to Bombay. The salient differences between them and mainstream Judaism had thus more chance to erode – though they certainly did not disappear. The process of "Talmudic streamlining" was much longer than with the Beta Israel. Though the latter were contacted in the 1860s, they were subsequently forgotten for about forty years. They were again brought to the attention of world Jewry around 1900, this time successfully. The Jewish scholar J. Faitlovitch, who visited them first in 1904–05, became a "missionary" trying to incorporate them into Western Judaism. He wanted to promote education among the Beta Israel, to reform their "Mosaic" (Old Testament) belief and rituals, and to appeal to Western Jews to take a sustained interest in their lot. Schools were set up before the Second World War, but the whole effort was thwarted by the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. The Beta Israel were again left to their own devices until the early 1950s¹³. Their traditional social organization, religion, and leadership structure remained virtually unchanged in this period, in fact until the 1970s.

3. Due to their sociocultural environment, the Bené Israel were caste-oriented; it dominated much of their outlook.¹⁴ The Beta Israel were much more an egalitarian-oriented community, predicated upon the characteristic individualism of rural Northwest Ethiopian society. They saw themselves as a suppressed group, blocked in its rights.

4. The Bené Israel never had a clear indigenous religious leadership. This was only instituted after David Rahabi's reforms: he appointed religious instructors (called *kajis*), after having them educated in Jewish lore. Later, other community leaders took over. The Beta Israel, in contrast, had an interesting leadership structure composed of monks, priests, and scribes (*debteras*), modelled on the Orthodox-Christian hierarchy. They provided the group with a strong, self-conscious and accepted stratum of guardians of the Israelite faith, in opposition to the Christians and Muslims.

5. Violence has marked the history of the Ethiopian Jews, not that of the Indian Bené Israel. Initially though, this violence against them was not primarily for religious reasons, but on account of political and territorial rivalry.

6. The differences in social organization and historical experience stimulated a different self-image within both communities: the Ethiopians were a more militantly self-conscious group, contesting their subjected status and discrimination, as well as the ideological grounds on which this was done by the Christians power holders. The Beta Israel were gradually forced out, or to the margins, of the social order of Amhara-Tigray society. Their way of life was more and more encroached upon, and Christian society habitually expressed its antagonism with them via the infamous *buda* accusation (cf. Abbink 1987). The Bené Israel in India were tolerated without problems, though circumscribed as a separate, non-Hindu group, akin to lower castes. Both groups could not "assimilate," and came to stress their Israelite-Jewish heritage defined on the basis of their specific historical experience, and *not* with reference to halachic¹⁵ criteria used later. Both groups were not only in a sociocultural sense (language, physical traits, dress, diet, etc.) defined as "Indians" and "Ethiopians," but also in their basic conception of Jewishness. Mainstream Judaism was for them, as

12 Christian missionaries were already active among them in the 1860s

13 For this period, see Summerfield 1999

14 The Bené Israel community itself was traditionally also divided in two "castes," the Gora (White) and Kala (Black), said to have been endogamous (Strizower 1971: 27 f.)

15 *Halacha* is Jewish religious law, that emerged from the Talmudic tradition

we will see, a possible addition to their Judaic identity, not a substitution for it.

2.4 The Indian and Ethiopian Ideas of Israelite-Jewish Identity: Ingredients of Cultural Identity before Immigration to Israel

Sustained by socioeconomic processes of differentiation, both groups developed a specific ethno-religious identity in their host environment. It implied the maintenance of a social boundary, delineating the minimal criteria for group membership and for "cultural performance" bound up with it. It cannot be attempted here to draw up a complete and extensively commented list of characteristics of both groups. But the most important diacritics which marked Bené Israel and Beta Israel identity in their country of origin were located in the domains of:

- rules of personal purity and purification (e.g., of women during menstruation and after childbirth, of persons having touched unclean objects or persons);
- dietary rules (*kashrut* interpretation);
- ideas of religious "authenticity" (e.g., the Beta Israel viewing their Judaism as an ancient pre-Talmudic, original form);
- patterns of early socialization and family life;
- core religious symbols and customs (Sabbath, domestic rituals, circumcision rules, ritual slaughter and sacrifice, offerings, particular festivals, synagogue life).

The time-honoured distinctions, setting them apart from the dominant groups in their countries of origin, were obviously the source for their construction of their Judaic self-image, providing their community with self-legitimization. Attempts to change this image, as for instance by mainstream-oriented Jewish reformers, were not a priori accepted.

Apart from these mainly religious aspects, both groups were shaped by the obvious cultural characteristics (such as language, codes of nonverbal and verbal behaviour, food preferences, gender relations, social outlook, and prestige criteria) which they shared with the non-Jews in the country of origin but not with the Jews in Israel. These psychologically-rooted aspects, constituting a *habitus* so to speak, cannot be so easily cast off.

3 Migration

Both groups differed in their attitude to, and motivation for, immigration to Israel.

3.1 Indian Jews

For the Bené Israel, the decision to migrate came in 1947, when India approached independence. There was no strong, traditionally sustained ideal to "return to the Land of Israel" (cf. Strizower 1971: 167), although before 1947 the idea of immigration to Israel was stimulated by Zionist emissaries who were active in India.¹⁶ But only *two* Bené Israel had immigrated to Israel before 1948. When in 1948 the State of Israel was proclaimed, a spontaneous identification with it emerged among the Bené Israel. After that year, a steady flow of immigrants started.

Before 1948, the issue of the "Jewish status" of the Bené Israel was never brought up within the Israeli religious establishment. The Bené Israel could also freely leave India. They neither had to cut off all their links with the country, nor with their relatives staying behind. Indian products could be imported to Israel (films, music, clothes, foodstuffs). From the start, there was also an option to return. Still today, there are about 5,000 Bené Israel living in India.

3.2 Ethiopian Jews

The Beta Israel (their self-name in Ethiopia) had a religiously couched though abstract and stylized ideal of ultimate return to the "land of the fathers" (called "Yerusalem," not Israel), expressed in many prayers and stories. This ideal was, undoubtedly, also stimulated by the attitude of their Orthodox Christian neighbours that the Beta Israel or "Falasha" were "exiled, landless strangers," remnants of a vanquished people. The Beta Israel were often identified with the Ayhud (= Jews) of the "Kibra Nagast," the national-religious epic of the Ethiopian Christians (the "charter myth" of the empire before 1974).¹⁷ However, it is an interesting fact that the Beta Israel already sent one of their representatives to Jerusalem long *before* the contact with the rest of the Jews was reestablished:

16 In fact, the Bené Israel received an invitation for the First Zionist Congress in 1897 in Basle, Switzerland

17 Cf Abbink 1991 and the works cited there

around 1855 (cf. Kessler 1982: 24 f.). Probably this person went partly for "religious-Zionist" reasons.

But in the subsequent decades, the Beta Israel were ignored by world Jewish organizations. In the early policy reports of the Jewish Agency concerned with immigration policy, the Beta Israel were not deemed suited for massive immigration to Israel like the Yemenite or Indian Jews. The Beta Israel never received permission from the Ethiopian authorities to emigrate, neither from Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie, nor (with occasional exceptions) from the revolutionary Derg government after 1974. They were also discouraged by the Israeli embassy in Ethiopia. The immigration process was thus very problematic.

Massive immigration only began in the 1980s, in a period of severe crisis in Ethiopia. Nearly all Beta Israel left Ethiopia illegally – for them, there was no way back. Of their own free will, they cut off all links with their mother country. The sacrifices they made to come to Israel were great: during the migration, about 4,000 Beta Israel are estimated to have died on the road due to exhaustion, armed robbery, disease, hunger, and thirst.

Table 1: Estimated Numbers of Beta Israel and Bené Israel Jews in Israel, 1952–2000

Year	1952	1969	1986	1994	2000
Group					
Bené Israel	2,300	12,000	22,000	28,000	35,000
Beta Israel	–	14	16,000	43,000	75,000 ¹⁸

4 The Struggle for "Recognition" in Israel

Their history and religious traditions, so long out of touch with mainstream Judaism, made the two communities "marginal." Religious Jewish circles in the West considered them of dubious Jewish status. But the Bené Israel and Beta Israel themselves never put into question their own Israelite/Jewish identity, despite an awareness of difference with the others. Regardless of the differences, they also came to see themselves as *part* of the world Jewish community. It could perhaps be said that accidents of history and geography made the application of the simple, accepted criteria to ascertain "Jewish identity" impossible. However, the problem, as they saw it, was primarily that of the other Jews,

not theirs. They could not but see themselves as ancient, loyal Jews. This image has been, and still is, the basic position and at the root of their identity in Israel.

In Israel, both communities came to face the problem of recognition as "full Jews" in a religious sense. For both groups, this problem has been treated in the literature on numerous occasions; I can only be brief here. Most important is to note the social and psychological impact that this struggle for identity has had on both communities. It is a fact that the shock effect was significant, casting a blemish on their self-image and strengthening the idea of a "boundary" with other Israelis. The Bené Israel and the Beta Israel both did not anticipate that they would enter a religious power structure in Israel led by Orthodox Jewish Chief Rabbis, who by Israeli law determine many matters of civil personal status (e.g., marriage and divorce) and religious practice. Together with developments in the sphere of "absorption" and socioeconomic opportunities, this aspect of religious confrontation shaped the outlines of *edah*-identity and social position of both groups.

4.1 The Bené Israel Struggle

The Bené Israel were treated as fully Jewish by the immigration emissaries of the Jewish Agency active in India in the 1930s. The same position was reflected in its early internal reports, such as that on the "dispersed communities of Israel" (*Nidché Israel*, an ideological term) of 1951. But when arriving after 1948, the Bené Israel had no easy time in getting themselves accepted. However, their first problems were more related to their difficult social and economic integration than with their religious status as such. (Perhaps the recognition problem did not arise due to three factors: very high Bené Israel endogamy in those first years; the largely secular atmosphere in the country, with a then much less powerful rabbinic establishment; and the ignorance among other Israelis of the backgrounds of the Bené Israel: there was no visible evidence that they were "deviant.")

During the initial decades, the Bené Israel, as part of a non-Western, relatively less educated population (or so they were considered) had problems in receiving decent housing and respected jobs, as most immigrants of non-Western origins at that time. In the first years, they were housed in *ma'abarot* (transit camps), not in the large cities. Later, in the late 1950s and 1960s, they received housing in the new "development towns." The

¹⁸ About 10–15% are Israeli-born

Bené Israel felt that they were misunderstood and that they suffered from prejudice and discrimination by "white Israelis," all of this contrary to their expectations of Jewish equality in Israel. They were taken aback by the paternalistic attitude of many European Israelis. Strizower (1966: 137 f.), in a review of the situation of Bené Israel in the town of Beer Sheva, noted that:

... the complaint that cropped up again and again in all their conversations was: "They don't esteem us; that is, the people that count in this country do not esteem us at all. The white skinned Israelis from Europe do not love our Bené Israel. But in India we were loved and esteemed."

Of course, there was more to it than Strizower suggests in her impressionistic article. The Bené Israel were part of the diffuse category of non-Ashkenazi, "Oriental" immigrants, to be "reeducated" or resocialized by the receiving society and seen as a different cultural group. Their severe disappointment, for both material and immaterial reasons, caused a part of the Bené Israel immigrants to demand "repatriation" to India, already in 1951. They stated that they were "too Indian" to live in Israel, despite their near equality in religion. The Jewish Agency granted repatriation to those who wished (some 340 people).

But soon afterward the same group when in India applied again to *return* to Israel: India had changed to much for them to be able to adapt to it. They felt excluded, had no money, could not find jobs in the new conditions of independent India. After the return of virtually all the protesters (who staged demonstrations and hunger strikes) in 1954, the Bené Israel issue died down, but their social and other problems were certainly not resolved. They remained a low-prestige "Oriental" group, increasingly withdrawn from the mainstream of Israeli society.

Their second crisis was the one around their Jewish halachic status, emerging after the refusal of some rabbis to register Bené Israel for marriage. As the Bené Israel had, in India, not followed halacha rules for marriage and divorce, there was, in the dominant Orthodox-religious view, a danger for *mamzerut* of the community. (The problem of "bastards," offspring of illegitimately married or divorced persons. This is of course a religious, *not* a "racial" rule.) Such offspring would then not be Jewish, though passing as such. This was seen as endangering their relations with other Jews in Israel, e.g., for purposes of marriage. The Israeli Chief Rabbinate declared in 1961 that although marriage of Bené Israel with other Jews was permissible in

principle, the maternal ancestry of candidates for marriage would have to be investigated at least for three generations back.

This decision caused indignant reactions from the Bené Israel. They were stigmatized again, now in the vital religious sense. Vehement protests and strikes were organized. On these occasions, the community suddenly showed a remarkable cohesiveness and leadership, and as a result of their public actions the issue became a national concern. The Israeli Parliament finally passed a government resolution calling upon the Chief Rabbinate to change its stand. After several years of protest, the Rabbinate finally gave in. The special directive singling out the Bené Israel was withdrawn on 31 August 1964, and the case was officially "closed" (see Ross 1982: 211 f.). But the struggle had its social effects. The "we-they" boundary with Israeli society was much reinforced. Bené Israel identification with Israeli Judaism received a blow, and despite their continuing social and economic integration in Israeli society, the attachment to their Indian Jewishness waxed stronger.

4.2 The Beta Israel Struggle

As we saw, after 1948 there was never an urge in Israel to stimulate the Ethiopian Jews to immigrate. This was a difference with the case of the Indians. The Beta Israel had to make it on their own. In nearly every respect, they "forced" the Israeli authorities into action, first on the recognition issue (in the late 1970s), later on the immigration issue (in 1980s), and currently on the issue of social integration, acceptance, and education. The Beta Israel as "African Jews" were indeed up against greater odds than the Bené Israel. Their historical and religious stigma was more pronounced, and their cultural background was, at the time, considered more "primitive." Finally, there were political considerations which stood in the way (the relationship between Israel and Ethiopia could not be compromised by Israeli insistence on rights for Beta Israel emigration). Thus, immigration assistance efforts by the Jewish Agency were not made in the 1950s. The "Falashas," as they were always called, came at first sporadically, as individual migrants. These were often male, unmarried, relatively educated youngsters, several of them sailors, who disembarked in the Israeli Red Sea port of Eilat.

In 1975 there were only some 160 Beta Israel in Israel, often having arrived on tourist visas or with a temporary residence permit, and then opting

to stay on in the country. Their campaign for recognition of immigrant status started with the help of sympathizers, and long remained without success. But in 1973, the Sephardi Chief Rabbi Ovadiah Yossef had accorded them recognition as Jews, and "descendants of the lost tribe of Dan"¹⁹. For Jewish-legal reasons it was, however, required that, once in Israel, the Beta Israel would undergo a token conversion: symbolic circumcision and immersion (*tewilah*) in a ritual bath (*mikweh*). This was to be done "in order to remove any doubts" on their origin and personal status. With the Beta Israel community so small, the issue did not come out in the open. Many Beta Israel before 1984 acquiesced in the requirement, though others refused. No doubt the ruling was strongly resented. In 1975, the then Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren subscribed to the view of Rabbi Yossef, and that same year the Israeli government decided to recognize the Ethiopians as Jews under the Law of Return, thus facilitating immigration efforts. But by then actual emigration of the Beta Israel from Ethiopia had become near impossible, as the country was in revolutionary turmoil and the Ethiopian government did not give permission. Only in 1977 two groups of Beta Israel (about 125 people) were able to emigrate legally.

In the mid-1980s several thousands of new Beta Israel immigrants arrived, all having left Ethiopia illegally, by way of Sudan. After May 1991 (when the Mengistu regime was toppled) many more came, and at present (2001) only a few thousand people of Beta Israel descent²⁰ are left in Ethiopia. Their emigration was due to a combination of deteriorating conditions in Ethiopia (disease, famine, drought, war, intergroup tensions, political crisis), prospects of improving their lives, and the desire to realize their vision of a "return" to what they saw as their original homeland. After this movement began in 1979, Israel was finally impelled to assist them with secret rescue campaigns (see Gruber 1987; Teicher 1998).

As the community of Beta Israel in Israel was growing, since 1980–81, the issue of "conversion" became more and more controversial. The new immigrants obviously knew nothing of this before they came. (It was of course not solved by the rabbinic and government decisions mentioned above. These only had confirmed in principle that the Beta Israel were Jews.) In the ensuing

years, the conversion issue grew into a full-blown controversy, significantly affecting the relationship of the community with Israeli society. It always caused feelings of insult and anger in individual cases. The Ethiopians here found themselves in a situation similar to that of the Bené Israel before August 1964 (cf. Weil 1996).

In 1985, after a month long demonstration of a large section of Beta Israel against the Chief Rabbinate in Jerusalem (see Kaplan 1988), the demand for symbolic conversion was amended. One Israeli rabbi (D. Chelouche) was appointed to perform Beta Israel weddings without symbolic circumcision and immersion. But it was a compromise; the requirement was never entirely repealed. The directive to inquire into the family history of individual marriage candidates from the Beta Israel community "in case of doubt" was maintained, although in practice it did not occur often. In 1995, more rabbis were also to be instructed to perform marriages of Ethiopians.

This issue was the first big public crisis marking the relations of the Beta Israel *edah* and the wider Israeli society. They saw the conversion demand as insulting their status and honour as a community (it was not applied to any other group). It was also seized upon by many Beta Israel to express their general dissatisfaction with Israeli society on other problems related to their social integration, housing, employment, perceived social discrimination, and education policy: there was a "cluster effect" (cf. Holt 1995). Their stigma as a "deviant," "problematic" group was perpetuated by this affair. It exacerbated problems and furthered tendencies of cultural separatism.²¹

The second public conflict, however, occurred in 1996 and was even more important: the "blood affair." In January it became known accidentally that the blood of Ethiopian Jews who donated to hospitals was routinely but secretly put aside and never used, for fear of AIDS contamination.²² So they were giving it for nothing. This caused enormous anger among the Ethiopians and led to a huge and violent demonstration in Jerusalem (with 20,000 participants) in which tear gas was

19 One of the twelve Biblical Israelite tribes

20 Many of them members of the Fälas Mura community, people who had converted to Ethiopian Christianity since the early 20th century.

21 As several surveys indicated, the Ethiopians also seem to have a higher than average suicide rate (Siegel 1994). While this rate may be exaggerated, the Israeli press made much of the phenomenon of suicides among the Ethiopians.

22 Ethiopian Jews are indeed the community with the highest rate of HIV-AIDS infection in Israel (Weil 1997: 410). The authorities thought it better not to tell the Beta Israel that their blood would never be used, in order to spare their feelings. When the affair became public, the opposite effect occurred.

used to contain the crowds and many people were injured.²³ The highly symbolic "discarding of blood" was interpreted as a physical rejection of the Ethiopian community as part of the body of the Jewish people (cf. Weil 1997; Kaplan 1999a: 549).

The public association of the Ethiopian Jews with AIDS resuscitated the stigma of the community. The demonstration led to the installation of an investigative committee and to appeasing gestures toward the community, but the blood policy was not substantially changed. More important here is the radicalizing and "boundary drawing" effect that this issue had on the Ethiopians: more disdain and disillusionment towards "white" Israeli society and its establishment, and more in-group orientation. The affair confirmed their perceptions of collective humiliation and inequality.

5 Paths of "Absorption"

Both groups once in Israel developed a specific response to their new society, very different from Ashkenazi as well as Sephardi-Oriental groups. Their being stereotyped as marginal and different played a significant role here. Both communities can also be said to have gone through some similar phases of engagement with Israeli society, among them:

- a) immigration and culture shock as a "coloured" minority immigrant group with low formal educational or professional skills;
- b) frustration of ideals of religious (Jewish) equality and of expectations of material improvement and advancement in society;
- c) retroactive in-group orientation and cohesion to strengthen collective claims to equal status as Jews and citizens and in order to gain access to resources;
- d) an ambivalent, dual identification with, on the one hand Israel as a Jewish state, and with *edah* traditions as the core of personal and group "identity" on the other. This is an *inversion* of their experience of stigma. As a result, subethnic group identification has grown in importance for both communities, and is being reproduced among the younger generation. This dual identification, however, should not be seen in a functionalist manner; it is not necessarily a harmonious process.

As "ethnic communities," the Indians as well as the Ethiopians, despite the time lag between their

immigration and integration paths, faced specific and in many respects similar problems not faced by other groups. They were not only socially and economically *disadvantaged* groups with a very unfavourable starting position in Israeli society due to a low level of formal education, and a lack of economic and language skills. They were also, more than other groups, carriers of a historical-religious *stigma*, symbolized in the colour of their skin, which declared them to be of dubious Jewish descent. On this point they differ significantly from the so-called *edot hamizrach* (Oriental communities), even though the stigma has largely been effaced in actual social practice and both groups do *not* frame their protests in terms of "racial discrimination."

Another common element in the "absorption path" of the Ethiopian and Indian Jews is, of course, their long position of *dependency*: their settlement, job opportunities, educational facilities, religious "training" (especially for the Beta Israel), social assistance programs, etc., were mostly controlled by the absorbing agencies in Israel and stifled community initiative. Both groups were, on account of their specific background (although the Indian Jews less so), directed to development towns, and came to enter a restricted range of occupations at the lower end of the social scale (factory workers, lower clerical workers, technicians, nurses, etc.). This pattern has of course changed by 2001, but remarkably slow. Without pursuing the details of the process here, it can be said that the social accommodation of the Bené Israel has led to their forming a low-ranked *edah* on the scale of ethnic prestige. Empirical studies of the community (already Weil 1977a, b and c, 1996, 1997) have shown the specific characteristics of their accommodation, indicating that they were not "absorbed" in the sense of an easy assimilation. Indeed, the entire terminology and approach of "absorption" of immigrants is now highly doubtful.

The integration trajectory of the Beta Israel has been different from that of the Bené Israel in that they have, since 1980, been cared for in a well-established structure of immigrant absorption centres, a setting of planned social change (cf. Abbink 1985; Hertzog 1995). The Ethiopians were seen as a special group in need of long-term guidance, in order to preclude "the problems of the fifties" with Oriental immigrants. After many years in these immigrant centres, the accommodation process of the Ethiopians has by now entered a decisive phase, with most of the immigrants having left the centres (although some are still

23 Even most non-Jewish Ethiopians were boiling with anger when they heard of this affair

there). However, the process of moving out has taken many years to complete, much longer than anticipated. The transition from the total institution of an immigrant centre to individual housing itself was not smooth, and often resisted (cf. Rosen 1996). Once they were left to their own devices, i.e., living independently in private housing and trying to get jobs, the Ethiopians tended more to revert to in-group behaviour. Despite all efforts, it appeared that many were not equipped with sufficient language, professional and social skills for Israeli society. There is a large proportion of Ethiopians living in relative poverty, and many do not or cannot improve themselves. The number of high school drop-outs as well as crime figures among the young are rising significantly.²⁴ State support programs did not secure an overall successful integration of this population. There are clear trends of spatial and social segregation.

The combined effects of the long, paternalistic absorption process and of socioreligious stigma – due to the conversion requirement impressed upon both groups in their recognition struggle – worked to establish a boundary consciousness and a renewed reflection on (Indian and Ethiopian) group identity. Religious and cultural symbols, value orientations, and their national heritage from the land of origin were revalued. This tendency is of course familiar. Many students of ethnicity have interpreted it in terms of the “existential” problem-solving of groups – recreating meaning in their new environment. Whether it can be said that groups revert to ethnic symbols and self-organization in order to establish a bond with an in-group to advance their own interests and thereby promote their own integration in society, is doubtful. Such a functionalist view still reflects too much preoccupation with the institutional “absorption” outlook of dominant groups or elites in society. Attention should be directed to the study of the process “from below,” from the point of view of the marginal groups themselves.

In the case of the Indians and Ethiopians, it is clear that they have their own perception, historically and culturally shaped, of what their right to equal status and identity is, and specifically what their “Jewishness” is in relation to the others. They cannot and do not give up their “deviant” version of it by unidirectionally adapting to the mainstream; they gauge to what extent this mainstream is compatible with their experiences and

their constructs. If not, they would, for instance, not have protested against the rabbinical rulings mentioned earlier. Thus, despite the often declared intentions of both groups to adapt and “integrate,” various sociocultural, religious, and psychological notions emerging from their “heritage” are kept and developed as valid reference points. These are only deemed problematic by outsiders (like the absorption agencies) because of the “marginality” of the groups in question. This perception in itself contributes to the social problems of the communities in question. In what follows, I outline some ingredients of the Ethiopian and Indian Jewish cultural models as ideational reference points.

6 Subethnic Identities as “Cultural Constructs” among the Bené Israel and Beta Israel

The subethnic identification of the Ethiopian and Indian groups in Israel has become salient in the process of interaction of their members with the wider society, so much is clear. Apart from socioeconomic criteria, both groups operate with a kind of cultural yardstick along which to judge the acceptable terms for “absorption” from *their* point of view.

6.1. The Bené Israel

S. Weil, in a pioneering study on the Bené Israel in the town of Lod, Israel (1977a), has described in sensitive detail the pattern of life of this Indian Jewish group.²⁵ Differential characteristics of the community may be located in the spheres of religious beliefs and ritual, social life (family, gender relations, marriage and endogamy, socialization), and cultural orientation (language, personal behaviour, and values).

The religious sphere is for the Bené Israel (and Beta Israel, see below) the most important one. As we saw earlier, the Bené Israel traditionally venerated the God of Israel, the Torah, observed the Sabbath, circumcision, *kashrut* (though not completely), eight of the eleven offerings summed up in Leviticus and Numbers, and many Jewish festivals and fasts (though *not* Hanukah, Succoth, Shavu'ot, or the fasts of Av, Gedaliah, Teveth, and Tammuz). These unknown religious days

24 In the 1990s, Ethiopian youth gangs made their appearance, terrorizing shopkeepers and neighbourhoods (see Halifa 1997; also Izenberg 1998).

25 Not much follow-up research on this community has been done since

were introduced by David Rahabi (cf. Weil 1977a: 37–39). The Bené Israel celebrated Purim as Holicha San (also a Hindu holiday in the same period). In Israel, the identification with the regular Jewish holidays, fasts, and observances is of course strengthened, but in addition the Bené Israel maintained the Indian-Jewish observances. These are not seen as contradictory with mainstream Jewish practice, but on the contrary as essential additions. Examples are:

1. The *Eliahu haNabi* ritual (Weil 1977a: 320 f.). This is a ritual recitation of benedictions and prayers, occasionally accompanied by a food-offering. It is also known as *Malida* and is done: a) weekly at the termination of the Sabbath, in the synagogue or at home; b) on the New Year for Trees. On that day the prophet Elijah appeared in Khandalah (Konkan, India) and ascended to Heaven. On this occasion a ritual dish is prepared and served; c) on occasions like birth, circumcision, and marriage, and after the purification on the 80th day following birth of a baby girl; d) spontaneously on the occasion of a thanksgiving or vow offering (324 f.). The firm belief in the value of the ritual is maintained in Israel. Elijah is a kind of Bené Israel patron saint of mediator between the individual Bené Israel and God. Weil (334) suggested that *Eliahu haNabi* "... represents an answer to individual and group problems; he is at once hope for individual salvation and community redemption." The ritual is a "boundary marker" vis-à-vis other Jewish groups.
2. The special emphasis on the *tashlich* ceremony, the symbolically casting away of sins over running water done on the Jewish New Year (Rosh haShana). The *tashlich* is, in fact, considered by Orthodox Jews to be ritual of "dubious origins," but the Bené Israel continue to widely practise it, also in Israel. According to some, it is similar to the Hindu *avabhrata snana* (cf. Ross 1982: 202), like also the *Eliahu haNabi* ritual is similar to the Hindu *prasada* (Weil 1977a: 325).
3. The strong Bené Israel prefer to frequent only their own synagogue. This is an important focus of group life (cf. Weil 1977a: 262 f.).
4. The emphasis on special days and fasts, not singled out as such in Orthodox Jewish practice, e.g., *Shila San* (the day after the Day of Atonement; cf. Weil 1977a: 307), and the special religious melodies and songs, and the Indian ritual dishes served on the various religious holidays (299 f.). In India they also abstained from eating beef.
5. Their devoutness and interpretation of several tenets of belief (Jewish and Indian) also contin-

ue to mark the Bené Israel in Israel as different. Although their religious praxis may not be "up to Orthodox standards," the Bené Israel see no contradiction like Western Jews would (Weil 1977a: 310 f.).

Also in the social and cultural sphere the Bené Israel maintain specific standards, although they cannot be treated here in detail. Noting in passing that "traditional" notions of family life are still in force, I draw attention chiefly to their attitude toward marriage with non-Bené Israel. When asked, Bené Israel say they have no objections to inter-*edah* marriages (especially with partners from "highly-ranked" *edot*), but in fact preference appears to be for marriage within the own *edah* (Weil 1977a: 201). The actual endogamy rate also seems to be high: among the Bené Israel in Lod it was 0.9 (197). This figure has probably only slightly decreased.

The retention of notions of "caste" is also evident, not so much in the Gora-Kala distinction but in the idea that they, as Indians, are rather different from others within the social hierarchy of Israel. This feeling was strengthened after the recognition struggle of the 1960s.

Finally, in the cultural sphere, one may also note a continued salience of ethnic style in language use (Marathi in domestic situations), the popularity of Indian films and videocassettes, food habits, dress (especially older women), the "restrained" personal style, and in values of personal dignity and honour which the Bené Israel see as lacking among most other Israelis. These in-group behavioural characteristics are still seen as standards of reference and performance within Israeli society, at least for them. They also outline their interpretation of "Jewishness."

Indian Jewish identity is further evident also in the existence of *Maiboli*, a Marathi quarterly, in the vibrant self-organization, the "Central Organization of Indian Jews in Israel" (COIJI), and in community gatherings. The annual meeting of the COIJI in August 2000 – with a folklore song and dance contest by Indian Jews – was attended by about 3,000 people. Notable here is that the expression of Indian Jewish ethnicity is much less "political" than that of the Ethiopians: it amounts to an "off-stage" cultivation of nostalgia and is not a public statement to Israeli society at large. Indeed, one could say that the Bené Israel feel it enhances their position in Israel if they do not emphasize their (past) "marginal status" and their struggle for recognition. Ignorance among the wider Israeli public about them would in a way be beneficial. (In this context, it is remarkable

that after S. Weil's work of the 1970s so little additional anthropological research was done on them.²⁶)

6.2 The Beta Israel

The Beta Israel or Ethiopian Jews have been emerging (reluctantly) as a distinct *edah* especially in the last fifteen years.²⁷ The crucial event initiating this process of community formation was perhaps the 1985 strike against the Chief Rabbinate. It recalls the actions of the Bené Israel in the early 1960s, but it took the Ethiopians much more time to get what they wanted, and even at present the issue has not completely died down. In addition, the Ethiopians' struggle came at a time when Israeli society's unitary ideology of integration/"absorption" of immigrants had come under severe strain and the notion of cultural pluralism had settled in the public consciousness. The very critical Israeli mass media also played a pivotal role in following the case of the Ethiopian Jews, and probably even had a radicalizing impact on the struggle of the community and on the rhetorical strategies of their leaders.

The present-day Ethiopian leadership is very different from that of the Indians: more public and more militant, both the young people in the Ethiopian self-organizations and from the priests (*gesotch*) struggling for recognition as religious community leaders. The Bené Israel leadership remained much more inner-directed, and has no more political axes to grind with the Israeli authorities.

From 1980 to 2000 the number of Ethiopians increased from ca. 400 to about 75,000 (see Table 1). Their consciousness and ethnocultural identity were strongly mobilized by the "recognition/conversion" issue and the "blood affair." The Beta Israel deeply resented the implication of doubt cast on their status as Jews, and did not understand the Jewish legal arguments that applied. The overall Ethiopian self-identification has waxed stronger on every account, and dissimilative tendencies within the Ethiopian immigrant population should not be underestimated. The Beta Israel have, in their public manifestations (demonstrations, protests, and the annual public religious holiday, the Seged) asserted *their* view of their Jewishness

and are developing their style of behaviour and use of religious symbols in accordance with it, also in the private domain. The emerging Beta Israel "model" can also be recognized in the three spheres mentioned for the Bené Israel.

In the *religious* domain, the Beta Israel have never understood the rabbinic doubts concerning their Israelite-Jewish identity. In their own view, it was precisely due to the premises of this identity that they kept their group intact and survived in Ethiopia. They had their *own* rules for divorce and marriage, which – though not similar in content to the Orthodox Jewish ones – were efficient in equivocally establishing Beta Israel group membership. They say that they cannot be blamed for involuntary historical isolation in the mountains of Ethiopia. The conversion requirement, and notably the search on family antecedents prior to a marriage, was a recurring insult and a negation of their tradition. As one older Beta Israel said:²⁸

There cannot be a final decision as to what form of Judaism is the correct one. Ours is the most ancient, from the days of the Temple . . .

From this argument follow others concerning the value of certain Beta Israel religious arrangements. These are not only rhetorically seized upon by younger spokesmen and leaders in order to advance claims to attention for other, more material matters on behalf of their "unique" community, but also for their intrinsic merits. We may then distinguish the following core issues that were often brought up:

1. The rules of ritual purification. These were in vigour in Ethiopia for women after birth of a child (40, or 80 days of isolation and subsequent cleaning of body and clothes) or during the period of menstruation, for persons having touched a corpse, or another unclean object or person. This complex of purity rules is impossible to maintain in Israel but is not rejected by most Ethiopians (cf. Trevisan Semi 1985; Schwarz 1998). Many say they should somehow be reinstituted, but such statements are more important for their rhetorical value – asserting the value of "tradition" – than their practicality.

2. The knowledge and role of the Beta Israel priests, the former religious leaders in Ethiopia. Their prestige rapidly declined in Israel because their position was redundant in the new context of Rabbinic Judaism as they did not know the Talmudic law and all mainstream religious

26 This in contrast to the case of the Ethiopian Jews in Israel, who are still the subject of a voluminous literature and multiple research projects.

27 As predicted in Abbink 1984: 326, 397.

28 Interview with the author, 1987, Tel Aviv.

customs. Rabbis took over religious instruction and reeducation of the community. This was not accepted wholeheartedly as the latter often paid no respect to Beta Israel religious traditions and interpretations. Beta Israel always felt that more honour should be given to the priests and elders in general. In the late 1980s, a training program was set up in the Machon Meir religious institute to reeducate Ethiopian Jewish priests in Talmudic Judaism, and several have graduated. However, the reconciling of traditional Ethiopian Jewish lore (prayers, rites) with Israeli Judaism is still a moot point. There is a continued esteem for the traditional prayers and religious melodies, although the contexts for their performance in Israel are decreasing. They may even be "invalidated" by the dominant Israeli Rabbinic tradition. There are also internal divisions among the priests.

3. Many Beta Israel are not convinced that the customs of ritual slaughter and sacrifice (e.g., on the occasion on Passover (*Fasika*) are to be entirely rejected. They can neither be maintained in Israel, but the arguments to abolish them have convinced few.

4. Traditions of magical healing, divination, and folk medicine are seen as a valid addition to regular medical practice. They are defended with reference to religious arguments, and grow in importance (see Abbink 1984a: 265 f.; Nudelman 1995, 1999).

5. A growing importance is attached to the annual Seged-festival. This day of pilgrimage and remembrance has now grown in to a major religious-ethnic festival of the Ethiopian Jews. It has also been "brought in line" with dominant ideas of immigration (*aliyah*) and integration (*mizug haGaluyot*, lit.: the mingling of the exiles) in Israeli mainstream discourse, transforming its original Ethiopian meaning. But it is still a specific Beta Israel festival. In order to interpret Beta Israel religiosity – also characterized by a specific devoutness – one has to note their frequent references to the traditional situation in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian customs (e.g., relating to strict Sabbath observance) are seen by many as correct and in principle still valid. The Oral Law in Israel the Ethiopians will accept, but are not always convinced by its circumventing rules and injunctions (cf. Trevisan Semi 1985: 111). Thus, among the Ethiopian Jews the process of evaluating Israeli Judaism in the light of their own Ethiopian Jewish precepts continues. They have developed a "rhetoric of purity" vis-à-vis mainstream Israeli Judaism (Schwarz 1998: 57) in which they express the belief the in many respects their way is "superior."

In the *social* sphere, the Beta Israel seem to pass through a long and difficult phase of transition. A period of disorientation, bereavement, and even "anomie" (as a result of the often traumatic emigration process) is gradually overcome, but the community still appears to be absorbed in social and family problems, for example, relating to male-female role strains and divorce. Ethiopians show a strong sociality, family ethos, a community orientation, but also specific patterns of rivalry and infighting (notably in the leadership). Extended family units are seen as frameworks of solidarity, although they cannot be reconstituted like in Ethiopia. Rules of hospitality are kept up, even though the financial burden is quite heavy compared to Ethiopia. But values like respecting the elders and inculcating obedient behaviour of children are in steep decline, as many Ethiopian youths take on loud Israeli ways or let themselves be inspired by African-American urban youth culture (rap, "cool" looks, flirting with hustling and crime).²⁹ They thus identify with and "appropriate" the derogatory label *Cushi* (= Blacks) that many Israelis apply to them (cf. Kaplan 1999a).

The attitude toward inter-*edah* marriage is positive, but Ethiopians find that they have few chances or opportunities of marrying partners from other groups. As a result, the endogamy rate is high among them and has grown since the extension of the community since the early 1990s. Beta Israel are conscious of the social and religious stigma still attached to them. In view of the circumstances they feel that there is nothing wrong with marrying primarily within their own group.

In the *cultural* sphere, a remarkable development has perhaps been the reduction of the initial feelings of *embarrassment* on their Ethiopian, so-called "primitive" customs. A sense of acceptance and pride has now emerged around their languages, customary dress, handicrafts, dietary habits, music, childrearing practices, traditional mediation practices, and even their folk-healing methods. The Ethiopian conceptions of interpersonal behaviour, honour, and self-presentation are different and remain a source of misunderstandings (cf. Rosen 1985, 1986; Ben Ezer 1985). The cultural differences are now often consciously *played upon* by the Ethiopians in their contacts with immigration authorities and institutions (Kaplan 1999b). They subscribe to the integration ideology of Israeli Jewish society, but this "everyday resistance,"

29 See Kaplan 1999a: 541 and Sari Bashi, "Ethiopian Jews Imitate U.S Blacks," *Associated Press* news item, 25-1-1999.

as Kaplan called it, reveals that the Ethiopians are engaged in a continuous game of dialogue and "negotiation" with the wider society. In the process, their ethnic identification is increasing.

For the Ethiopian Jews, this seems to have been more problematic than for the Bené Israel, who acquiesced sooner in their relatively separate status as "Indians" in Israel. The Ethiopians were in a longer phase of struggle,³⁰ and judging from the statements and militancy of some community leaders, they still are. The central issue creating anger and distrust has been the above-mentioned "blood affair." The Beta Israel/Ethiopian Jews themselves now tend to question the simple idea of *mizug haGaluyot* (mingling the exiles) as defined from above. If the institutional conditions to effect this integration (full religious equality, supportive but not paternalistic integration assistance, no social, religious, and occupational discrimination, etc.) are not met, one cannot be surprised to see them take the road of disengagement from the normative sociocultural and religious arena.

The identification of young Beta Israel with an aggressive and semicriminal African-American youth culture is the opposite of the response of the Bené Israel: the latter identify with the "country of origin" and its Hindu-Indian culture in a less visible and less militant way. They watch Indian movies on video and Indian satellite T.V., buy Indian music cassettes, etc. and do not expose this "identity" – and neither their problems – on the streets. Somewhat like the Kurdish, Ethiopian, and Moroccan communities organizing notable public festivals, the Indian Jews have their annual meeting of the COIJI (see above) but this is very much an in-group affair. Their "public reputation" is also more positive. A typical comment reflecting the mainstream view of the Indians in Israel is the following, in a national newspaper: "The Bené Israel have proved to be a positive element in Israeli society – industrious and civil – despite early rebuffs from the rabbinate" (Wigoder 1990).

7 Conclusion: Return to the "Cultural Stuff"-Approach?

The gist of this paper may lead one to think of a return to a kind of ascriptive approach to ethnic identity, one which was already criticized by Barth

(1969): the "cultural stuff" is important and will reassert itself sooner or later. This is not my intention. The cultural stuff, it does not speak by itself and is not inherited or "imported" in unchanged fashion, but is dynamic *par excellence*. Contrary to most postmodernist anthropology, however, I do not subscribe to the view that "culture" and ethnic tradition are so "flexible" and "manipulable" that the historical facts do not count or are deemed unrecoverable. On the contrary, there is an identifiable historical fund and a cultural *habitus* on which people draw in contemporary identity formulations. To be emphasized is not the invention of tradition, but its *reinvention*, based on historical facts and representations. A reassessment of the Weberian problematic of the relation between cultural values and socioeconomic processes is also in order.

The renewed salience of "primordial traits" among Bené Israel and Beta Israel is essentially to be interpreted as the *result* of the structure of interaction in Israel as a culturally plural society, with scarce resources in the arena of immigrant absorption. The generative mechanism that yields the maintenance of cultural groups and ethnic identities consists of a set of related factors like embodied and enacted cultural difference, symbolic effects of (perceived) colour difference, and, foremost, a structure of failed reciprocity between groups in a complex society that cannot materially address all the needs of immigrants. The following elements contribute to this:

- the lingering social stigmatization of the two groups, as they are dark-skinned and did not share the mainstream Talmudic version of Judaism and Jewish identity due to their "long historical isolation";
- the continued normative/ideological pressure of the Israeli Rabbinic establishment on immigrant *edot* like the Bené Israel and Beta Israel, with their specific, historically situated background and religious orientation, to "conform";
- the social "careers" of the two groups being difficult, due to a low socioeconomic starting position. Despite favourable individual exceptions, they are still located disproportionately low on the scale of social prestige;
- the sociopsychological reinforcement of group identity following religious and social crises in which their collective identity was questioned. This especially held for the Ethiopians, who did not take the problems lying down (cf. the 1996 "blood scandal").
- the emerging affective cultural bond that ties members within the two communities together.

30 Already in the mid-1980s there were some ten interest groups working on behalf of the Ethiopians in Israel, some purely Ethiopian, some run by non-Ethiopian supporters and sympathizers.

There is alleged to be an "Indian" or "Ethiopian" sociality and cultural style, reactivated during community occasions and increasing as the community expands in number. The renewed interest for Indian and Ethiopian music, clothes, books, videocassettes, spices, and other food items (imported in quantities from the motherland) fits into this pattern. The trajectory of the Ethiopians here has a strong resemblance to that of the Indians a generation earlier, but is more visible and now purposely cultivated.

One cannot but conclude that the "cultural stuff" (Barth 1969) is given a new lease of life, but in the context of the modern state it takes on new forms. This accounts for the fact that, in important respects, these two groups "construct" their identity and images of self in Israel's pluriform society by a kind of community withdrawal process, in which their version of "Jewishness" (Goldberg 1985) is redefined. This is evident from, e.g., ritual and social gatherings, intermarriage patterns, language use (Marathi, Amharic, and Tigrinya are still transmitted to the young in domestic contexts and many social occasions), and the dissociative youth culture among Ethiopians, identifying with the subcultural idiom and style of young urban African-Americans.

Apart from the cultural dynamics, two wider social processes underlie this tendency: a) economic and social marginalization, inhibiting mobility, and creating a kind of ethnic underclass, and b) the political process of competition and lobbying of ethnic communities within the modern bureaucratic Israeli state. These developments also tend to subvert the fluidity of ethnicity. Social and cultural lines are drawn along the communities of origin, who now have *reinvented* or restyled their own interpretation of "descent" and "identity".

The Ethiopian and Indian immigrants do continue to believe in the grand narrative of Zionism, and make political claims in the name of it at a time when many Israelis have come to seriously question this narrative as a socially integrative force.³¹ But in a culturally plural society these two things go together, because often there is still the assumed *Leitkultur*³² which all groups in some form take for granted or refer to, even if it is no

longer held normative. Meanwhile, a greater emphasis on empirical instead of speculative studies on the generative and reproductive mechanisms of ethnicization – within the two wider processes just mentioned – will be the challenge of future work in ethnic and migration studies.

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31 There is a lot of literature on this. For an interesting general survey of the issues, see Vidal and Algazy 1999.

32 With this apparently controversial concept, emerging in German public debate in 2000, I refer to the historically inherited social structure of a society or nation, including its national/cultural history, its symbolism of religion (often a former state religion), and its economic and legal-institutional frameworks.

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