

## BETA ISRAEL STUDENTS WHO STUDIED ABROAD 1905-1935

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From 1905-1935, Dr. Jacques Faitlovitch, a Jewish "counter-missionary", took out 25 Beta Israel students to study in Jewish communities in Europe and the Middle East with a view to them returning to their Ethiopian villages to teach their brethren about normative Judaism. The paper "zooms in" on five Beta Israel students who studied in different countries in different periods. Notable is Prof. Taamerat Ammanuel, who became Emperor Haile Selassie's aide, and was buried in Jerusalem in 1963. The paper examines the complex interplay of Ethiopian and Jewish identities among these students.

### Introduction

This paper documents the Beta Israel pupils who studied outside Ethiopia during the years 1905-1935. The Beta Israel hail from villages in Gondar province, Woggera, the Simien Mountains, Walkait, the Shire region of Tigray, and other regions. Depending upon their area of origin, they speak Amharic or Tigrinya, or occasionally both. Previously known as "*Falasha*", and today in Israel designated the Ethiopian Jews (Weil 1995), the Beta Israel trace their origins to ancient times in Ethiopia; scholars also attribute their origins to other historical periods (Kaplan 1992; Quirin 1992). The Beta Israel practised a Torah-based type of religion (Leslau 1951), which had affinities to Ethiopic Christianity (Pankhurst 1997). Today, 110,000 Ethiopian Jews and their offspring live in Israel<sup>2</sup>. An inestimable number of Ethiopians, recently designated "Felesmura", claim some form of Beta Israel origin and are hoping to emigrate to Israel.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Ethiopia began to open up to foreigners. As well as the missionaries and travelers, scholars visited Abyssinia to study Semitic and other languages. Among these was the Jewish Professor Joseph Halevy, a researcher at the Sorbonne in Paris, who left for Ethiopia in 1867 and wrote about the poor condition of the "Falashas", as they were then known (Halevy 1877). He was instrumental in facilitating Daniel, a Beta Israel boy, to reach Europe in 1868. However, Daniel was not accepted in the *Alliance Israelite Universelle* school in Paris, on the grounds that he was neither Jewish nor suitable. He was sent back to Alexandria in Egypt, where he died shortly afterwards (Trevisan Semi 2005:76; Weil 2006). Daniel was the forerunner of the Beta Israel boys who are the subject matter of this paper.

### Focus of the Paper

The focus of the paper will be the students taken out of Ethiopia by Dr. Jacques Faitlovitch (1881-1955), a student of Semitic languages at the Sorbonne under the

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<sup>2</sup> For a selection only of different works on the Ethiopian Jews in Israel, see: Leshem 2004; Offer 2004; Weil 1999a.

abovementioned Prof. Joseph Halevy. Inspired by his mentor, Faitlovitch left Paris under the sponsorship of Baron Edmund de Rothschild for his first expedition to Ethiopia in 1904 (Trevisan Semi 1999a). During the visit, he surveyed the situation of the Beta Israel and returned in 1905 to Palestine and Europe with two “Falasha” boys: Taamrat Emmanuel, whom he took out of a Swedish Protestant mission in Asmara, and Gete Hermias, whom he met in a village in Gondar (Faitlovitch 1905)<sup>3</sup>. From the time of this first mission to Ethiopia until 1935, when he was finally prevented from visiting Ethiopia because of the fascist Italian occupation, Faitlovitch brought out of Ethiopia 25 young Falasha males, whom he “planted” in different Jewish communities in Palestine, Europe and Egypt. Faitlovitch’s aim was to promote and implement educational projects among the Beta Israel, a “lost” tribe, and bring them in line with world Jewry. He succeeded in establishing a school for the Beta Israel in Dembea in 1913, which shut down and was transformed into the Addis Ababa school in 1923 (Trevisan Semi 1994). He appointed Taamrat as the principal of the school (Trevisan Semi 2000), and many of the students later taught there upon their return to Ethiopia until it was closed by Fascist forces. Faitlovitch died in Tel Aviv, Israel in 1955 (Weil 1987a).

Each pupil educated in Europe had an individual personality and story; all experienced a complete metamorphosis as a result of their contact with a new non-Ethiopian culture.

### **History of Scholarship on Dr. Faitlovitch’s Pupils**

In the 1950’s, Messing recorded brief biographies of five Beta Israel students who were brought out by Dr. Faitlovitch to Europe and elsewhere during the period under study. He described them thus: "Getye Jermias – Faithful Disciple, Taamrat Emmanuel – Diplomat and Rebel, Taddesse Yaqob – Civil Service Excellency, Reuben Issayas – Rural Commander in Peace and War, Yona Bogale – Leader and Scholar at Home and Abroad"(Messing 1982:62-79).<sup>4</sup>

In 1962, Richard Pankhurst published a seminal work on the foundations of education, printing, books and literacy in Ethiopia, in which he mentioned for the first time a relatively large group of 22 Beta Israel pupils who had studied abroad (Pankhurst 1962).<sup>5</sup>

However, it was the immigration of Beta Israel to Israel from the late 1970’s on and the excitement caused by Operation Moses (1984-5) (Wagaw 1991) and later Operation

<sup>3</sup> As usual with Ethiopian names, there is a problem as to how write them in English. In the case of Dr. Faitlovitch's pupils, they all had different renderings, as well as “new” Hebrew names, invented by Dr. Faitlovitch. For example, Taamrat Emmanuel is usually written this way in English, and signed his letters in different languages thus, but the *Encyclopedia Aethiopica* editors requested me to write the correct transliteration- Taamerat Ammanuel (Weil 2008). Gete Hermias has been called variously Ghetie Hermias, Gete Wondemagegnehu and Gete Yirmias or Yirmiyahu (Jeremiah); the Hebrew version of his name was bestowed upon him by Dr. Faitlovitch. In the case of Solomon Isaac, Solomon's father was Ishaq, the Amharic equivalent of Isaac. Solomon signed himself in Hebrew as “Solomon ben Yitzchak” or “Solomon Yitzchak (the Falashi)”. I prefer the name “Isaac” in English, which is more reminiscent of the original Amharic, although it is an arbitrary decision. There are various spellings in English of Taddesse Yacob's name: Taddasa Yaqob, Taddesse Jacob and more. This article has selected the way Taddesse Yacob himself chose to write and sign his own name in English; he even wrote me his own curriculum vitae with this spelling (personal correspondence Taddesse Yacob-Shalva Weil, May 1989).

<sup>4</sup> In addition, he included "Mallese Tekle-the Pure Soul", a young pupil of Dr. Faitlovitch, who was sent by Emperor Haile Selassie after Dr. Faitlovitch’s death on a tour of municipalities in the USA in 1956 and never returned (Messing 1982:70-71).

<sup>5</sup> Pankhurst mentions only 22 pupils, but I have reconstructed, with the help of Taddesse Yacob a fuller list of 25.

Moses (1991) (Spector 2005) that spurred on research into the Beta Israel students who studied abroad during the first half of the twentieth century.

Since the 1980's, the lives of several of the 25 pupils have been documented, and the fate of others is only now coming to light. Some of these "boys" succeeded in obtaining higher education and returned to Ethiopia as teachers in the Addis Abeba school for the Beta Israel children. Others, such as Abraham Meir and Hizkiyas Finas, died in Europe of disease; Solomon Isaac, who studied in Jerusalem and kept a "secret" diary in Hebrew, died on the way back to Ethiopia in the 1920's. Still others received important government or municipal positions in Ethiopia. Taamrat Emmanuel became an aide to Emperor Haile Selassie, and was eventually buried in Jerusalem.

Examples of scholarship in the field include the obituary of Yona Bogale recalling his life's work (Weil, 1987b), reconstruction of the tragic life of Hizkiyas Finkas (Trevisan Semi, 1999a), the life and death of Solomon Isaac (Weil, 1999b), the trips of Menguistu Yitzchak and Mekuria Tsegaya to Europe (Mekuria, 1999), detailed information on Taamrat Emmanuel (Grinfeld 1985; Trevisan Semi 2000), and more (e.g. Summerfeld 2003).

So far, there is no published life-history of Hailu Desta<sup>6</sup>, but an academic article written by the Ethiopic scholar Ullendorff documents letters from Taamrat Emmanuel to "Al'Azar Desta" (sic) (Ullendorff 1986/7), utilizing the Hebrew name Elazar that Dr. Faitlovitch bestowed upon him in Germany.

### **"Zoom in" on five Pupils**

While it would be impossible in a paper of this scope to cover the biographies of all the Beta Israel students who attended schools out of Ethiopia, at least 11 biographies have been well documented to date (Taamrat, Solomon, Yona, Taddesse, Hailu, Adgeh, Hizkiyas, Mekonnen, Gete, Mekuria, Mengistu); the remaining 14 will be more difficult to document<sup>7</sup>.

In this paper, I shall focus upon five of the students, to whom research has recently devoted, in order to illustrate the rich lives of these Beta Israel students, their varied experiences and their fates. The students I have selected here are: Taamrat Emmanuel, Solomon Isaac, Abraham Adgeh, Hizkiyas Finas, and Taddesse Yaqob.

#### *Taamrat Emmanuel*<sup>8</sup>

Taamrat Emmanuel (1888-1963)<sup>9</sup>, intellectual, teacher, and friend of Emperor Haile Selassie, was born in the village of Azezo, Gondar province, to a Beta Israel father, Fanta Dawit, and a noble Christian mother, Trunesh. In 1904, Dr. Faitlovitch first met Taamrat Emmanuel in the Swedish Protestant mission in Asmara, and, together with

<sup>6</sup> Hailu Desta lived for some time in my house in Jerusalem before his death. In the SOSTEJE (Society for the Study of Ethiopian Jewry) conference, which took place in Milan, Italy, in 1999, I presented Hailu Desta's biography. SOSTEJE is an international organization aimed at promoting research on Ethiopian Jews (see: [www.sosteje.org](http://www.sosteje.org)). At the last SOSTEJE conference at the University of Addis Abeba, I was elected SOSTEJE President.

<sup>7</sup> I am currently reconstructing the life of Ermias Issayas, who studied in Palestine 1926-7, about whom nothing has been written and from whom we have no letters in any archive. The biography is being reconstructed through repeat interviews with his 87-year old daughter, references to him in Dr. Faitlovitch's diaries and letters to and from Taamrat Emmanuel. The paper on his life will be presented at the next SOSTEJE conference in Florence, Italy, in October 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Most of this biography will appear in Weil (2008). For the most scholarly work on Taamrat to date, see: Trevisan Semi 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Zewde (2002:46) states that Taamrat's year of birth was 1893, although he concedes in a footnote (51) that Ullendorff (1990) dates his birth to 1888.

Gete Hermias, took him to Europe to study Jewish and secular subjects. Taamrat studied for two years at the *Alliance Israelite Universelle* school in Auteil, France (1905-1907), and for more than a decade at the Rabbinic College in Florence, Italy, under the guidance of Rabbi Zvi Margulies (1858-1927), founder of the Pro-Falasha Committee in 1906-7. In 1916, Taamrat received a qualification as a ritual slaughterer. In 1921, Taamrat moved to Palestine, until Dr. Faitlovitch collected him in 1923 on his way to Ethiopia in order to recruit more Beta Israel students to study in Europe. Taamrat knew to read and write in Amharic, Tigrinya, French, Italian and Hebrew.

In 1923, Dr. Faitlovitch established the Falasha school in Addis Abeba (Grinfeld 1992), and appointed Taamrat as its first principal. In 1931, Taamrat traveled with Faitlovitch to the United States to gain financial support for the American Pro-Falasha Committee. He was the first Ethiopian Jew to visit America and delivered a fund-raising speech in Italian to different Jewish organizations making them aware of the plight of the Falashas. Back in Ethiopia, Taamrat acted as principal of the school until 1936, when the school was closed during the Italian occupation. Taamrat, who had penned an anti-fascist article in France, translated into Amharic, caused a furious reaction from the Italian Legation. In 1937, he was forced to take refuge, together with some of the teachers and pupils from the school, in the Beta Israel villages of Ambober and Wuzaba in Gondar. In 1938, in the wake of the reprisals following the attempted assassination of the Italian general Rudolfo Graziani, Taamrat fled to Egypt, and subsequently met Dr. Faitlovitch in Palestine. He then joined the Emperor Haile Selassie's government in exile in London.

In 1941, after the liberation of Ethiopia by the British, Taamrat triumphantly returned to Ethiopia with the Emperor. He first worked in the Ministry of Education (Zewde 2002) until he was requested to revamp the Foreign Ministry. From 1948-1951, he held the position of cultural attaché of the Ethiopian Legation in Paris.

Throughout the years, Taamrat continued to champion the cause of his Beta Israel brethren, at times interceding on their behalf with the Emperor. However, he was unable to re-open the Falasha school, and was troubled about their education (Grinfeld 1985). Taamrat Emmanuel wrote numerous newspaper and scholarly articles, including notes on Falasha monks (Leslau 1974), translations of excerpts from Susenyos' chronicles into Italian and an Amharic manuscript on Gandhi<sup>10</sup>.

During his latter years, Taamrat's relations with the Emperor became strained over the former's disdain of feudalism, his protest at the delay in instituting land reform, and his refusal to write the Negus' biography. Taamrat departed for self-imposed exile, in Eritrea, Djibouti and finally in Jerusalem, Israel. At first, he lived in the Ethiopian Christian quarter in Jerusalem, but later moved to a rented apartment in the Jewish part of the city. He died there, unmarried with no descendants, in 1963.

#### *Solomon Isaac (Salomon Yeshaq)*<sup>11</sup>

Solomon Isaac (c.1890-1921) was born in Sekelt province and was one of the pupils of the great Beta Israel priests at Guraba. When Dr. Faitlovitch arrived on his second expedition to Ethiopia in 1908-9, he was accompanied by Gete Hermias, whom he had taken to Palestine and Italy after his first Ethiopian expedition (Faitlovitch 1910). Gete introduced his cousin Solomon Isaac to Dr. Faitlovitch. The three arrived in Jerusalem in 1909 and Solomon joined Gete at the Lemel school in Jerusalem, but soon Gete was

<sup>10</sup> The original unfinished manuscript was given to me by his nephew Tadesse Yacob.

<sup>11</sup> The section on Solomon Isaac is primarily based upon: Weil (1999b, 2008)

transferred to Florence and Paris, and Solomon remained alone in Jerusalem. He learned Hebrew, Torah and secular subjects, and pursued an orthodox Jewish way of life. In 1914, when the First World War broke out, Solomon Isaac found himself isolated. He kept a diary written in excellent Hebrew, some of which is preserved, in which he describes an eye-witness account of the British General Allenby's entry into Jerusalem in 1917 and the termination of Turkish rule in Palestine. By 1918, the entries in Salomon's diary were becoming increasingly melancholy. He wrote desperate letters to world Jewish leaders, signing his letters "Solomon Yitzhak (the Falasha)" and asking them to help him. Finally, in 1920, Dr. Faitlovitch managed to return to Jerusalem, accompanied by Taamrat Emmanuel, a renowned Beta Israel student who had studied abroad. Faitlovitch agreed to take Solomon Isaac back to Ethiopia, but on the way Solomon died in the fortress of Marob in Egypt, probably from hepatitis<sup>12</sup>.

### *Hizkiyas Finas*<sup>13</sup>

Hizkiyas (1907/8-1931) was born in the Beta Israel village of Wolleqa, situated on the north-western edge of Gondar, four kilometers from the city centre, where, as a young boy, he tended a flock as a shepherd.<sup>14</sup> In 1920, Dr. Faitlovitch went on his fourth expedition to Ethiopia, and in 1921 he took back with him four boys, whom he wanted to educate in different Jewish communities abroad. These included Yona Bogale and Abraham Meir, whom he placed in Jerusalem, Abraham Baruk, who was received by a Jewish community in Switzerland, and Hizkiyas Finas, who was sent to Florence, Italy. Hizkiyas was placed with a childless German Jewish couple called Gruenwald, but the Florentine lawyer Alfonso Pacific had to shoulder the financial burden of the boy's upkeep and education. The Gruenwalds housed him in bad sanitary conditions, and, alone, with no Ethiopian companion, the boy became ill. He was transferred to a Jewish sanatorium in Merano, but the principal did not have the means to retain him there. He was returned to Florence, but nobody could take care of him. In 1929, he finally left Italy for Egypt with tuberculosis. He was taken in by Rabbi David Prato, originally from Florence, who was the chief rabbi of Alexandria from 1927-1936<sup>15</sup>. Prato protested the idea of sending a TB patient to the humid Egyptian climate, but to no avail. Hizkiyas died in Alexandria on 7 February 1931.

### *Abraham Adgeh*<sup>16</sup>

Abraham Adgeh (Abrəham Adgäh) (1910-1975) was born in a village in Woggera, Ethiopia, in 1910. Together with his friend, Hailu Desta, he ran away to Dr. Faitlovitch's school in Addis Abeba in order to receive some education.

In 1927, he was taken to Europe by Dr. Faitlovitch, along with Hailu Desta and Mekonnen Lowy (Trevisan Semi 2005). Abraham and Mekonnen were placed in the London Jewish community, and Hailu moved from Paris to Frankfurt. Abraham lived with the Levys, an orthodox German Jewish family, in Highbury, London, and attended the St. John's College from 1924-28. He was a good student and acquired excellent English, as well as Hebrew.

<sup>12</sup> In a German novel on Solomon Isaac entitled *Salomo der Falascha*, the author, Selig Schachnowitz, makes Solomon die without returning to Ethiopia, but in the novel he is killed defending Jerusalem (Sohn 2005).

<sup>13</sup> The section on Hizkiyas Finas is primarily based upon: Trevisan Semi (1999b).

<sup>14</sup> Further information on Wollaqa, will be available in Weil (2008).

<sup>15</sup> In 1936 he became the Chief Rabbi of Rome.

<sup>16</sup> This section on Abraham Adgeh is primarily based upon: Weil (2003, 2005).

In 1935, Abraham Adgeh was recalled to Ethiopia. He returned to the Beta Israel village of Ambobär in Gondär, but found it difficult to adjust to village life, so he moved to the Falasha school run by Taamrat Emmanuel in Addis Abäba. In the same year, he was sent to Massawa as an interpreter. In 1939, he took up a senior position in the municipality of Gondär. In the 1940's Adgeh worked in Addis Abäba translating British law into Amharic. During the Second World War, he sent a few letters to his English adoptive family, the Levys. After a period in Harär and in Eritrea, from the 1960's on, he worked as the head of the purchasing and maintenance division of the Addis Abäba municipality. He was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Addis Abeba in 1975.

#### *Tadesse Yacob*<sup>17</sup>

Tadesse Yacob (1913–2005) was born in the village of Semano in the Sekalt district in Dembia. He was the son of Negussie Jember and Yeshiharag Gabre-Mariam, the sister of the Beta Israel leader Taamrat Emmanuel. In 1925, Tadesse joined Dr. Faitlovitch's school in Addis Abeba. In 1930, Tadesse was selected to study abroad in Egypt at the Jewish school, *L'Ecole Moise de Cattani Pacha de la Communaute Israelite du Caire*. He subsequently moved to the *Lycee Francaise* in Cairo, where he studied till 1937. In 1940, he was recruited to work in the Secretariat of the Secret Service of the English army in Khartoum. In October 1940, he was appointed chief of the Propaganda Unit of the Godjam Front on behalf of Haile Selassie, who was hoping to re-enter Ethiopia. From 1941-44, Tadesse was Director of the Ministry of Finances in Ethiopia. In 1952 he was appointed Director-General of the Mines in the Ministry of Finance; in 1956 he acted as Assistant Minister of the Ethiopian Electric Light and Powers Authority; in 1958 he was appointed Vice Minister of the Ministry of Finances. In 1960, Tadesse became Vice-Minister of the Ministry of Agriculture. In December 1961, he was appointed Minister of State in the Prime Minister's Cabinet, a post he held till 1966, when he was appointed High Public Service Commissioner with the rank of Minister of the Public Service Pension Commission, and of the Central Personnel Agency and Public Service Commission. From 1964 till 1974, when he was imprisoned as part of Haile Sellassie's entourage, he also acted as President of the Advisory Council of the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia.

Tadesse Yaqob received many awards, including the Ethiopian Star of Victory in 1941, and the Africa Star from the English.

After the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Tadesse served as treasurer in Dr. Faitlovitch's Pro-Falasha Committee, which established a school for the Beta Israel in Asmara. He more than once interceded with the Emperor on behalf of his village brethren and was instrumental in the 1950's in dispatching two groups of youth to study in Israel. Nevertheless, he perceived himself as totally Ethiopian. When Operation Solomon took place in 1991 and the Beta Israel were airlifted to Israel from Addis Abeba, he preferred to remain in Ethiopia, where he died in 2005.

#### **Conclusion: The Contribution of the Beta Israel Students to Ethiopia**

In this paper, I have discussed the curious phenomenon of the Beta Israel boys, who studied outside Ethiopia during the years 1905-1935. There were Christian forerunners to this phenomenon, as Ethiopian boys were taken to be educated in Europe, notably in St. Chrischona, Switzerland and in other Missions. There was also one nineteenth

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<sup>17</sup> This section on Tadesse Yacob is primarily based upon: Weil (2006,2008).

century Beta Israel forerunner to the larger phenomenon of 25 pupils, taken by Dr. Jacques Faitlovitch from different areas in the interior of Ethiopia, to study in Jewish communities in Palestine, Egypt and Europe. Each student, taken out of Ethiopia, was an individual with an extraordinary and often tragic tale. Some died in Europe; others became successful and famous, but they remained affected psychologically by their lonely experiences prior to the Second World War.

Research into all 25 of the Beta Israel students who studied abroad only started in the 1960's but made great strides in the 1980's and 1990's due to two factors: the popularity of the Beta Israel as an object of research following their emigration to the State of Israel in Operation Moses (1984-5) and Operation Solomon (1991); and the establishment of SOSTEJE (Society for the Study of Ethiopian Jewry), which encouraged the presentation of papers on these students at its international conferences. The methodologies used to study the students included interviews, diaries, archival work and bibliographic research<sup>18</sup>. Recently, there appears to be more academic interest in the subject and hopefully, this paper will inspire further research into additional Ethiopians, Beta Israel or others, who studied outside Ethiopia during the twentieth century.

In this paper, I "zoomed in" on the narratives of five extraordinary Beta Israel students taken out of Ethiopia. Of the five, two from one family became well-known in Ethiopia. Taamrat Emmanuel was the aide to the Emperor Haile Selassie and his nephew Tadesse Yacob rose to the rank of Minister. Two others never returned to Ethiopia. Solomon Isaac died tragically on the return journey to Ethiopia, having survived the terrible conditions in Jerusalem during the First World War. Hizkiayas Finas died in Italy of tuberculosis. Abraham Adgeh was different from most of the other Beta Israel who studied in Europe. He represented a "new" type of Beta Israel - a more worldly one, more cosmopolitan, the Ethiopian hero of a particular historical period. And yet, he imbibed the English education he was given. In time, he became the epitome of an English gentleman, despite the fact that he never abandoned his Ethiopian identity.

The interplay of Ethiopian and Jewish identities, overlapping with European and Palestinian identities, presents a complex picture of individuals, whom Dr. Faitlovitch could not succeed in moulding, despite his vision and dream. Taamrat, Solomon, Hizkiyas, Adgeh and Tadesse were all influenced by the Jewish education they received, but in the end, those that stayed alive remained distinctly "Ethiopian".

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<sup>18</sup> It is a pity that research funds were not available to support more systematic research into all the students who were then alive in the 1980's; some pupils died only recently; one is still alive.

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