

Guest Editorial

Israel Must Recognise the Falasha Jews

By DAYAN PINCHAS TOLEDANO

In a recent issue of the Jewish Chronicle, under the heading "Falshas condemned to destruction," the Falasha Welfare Association's spokesman expressed the view that the present plight of the Falashas is due to the "attitude of the religious authorities and the Jewish Agency."

This statement is misleading, for those interested in the welfare of the Falashas know full well that the responsibility lies squarely on the shoulders of the Israeli government and the Jewish Agency and not on the "religious authorities." It is now more than four years since the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel, Ovadia Yossef, ruled that the community of "Beta Israel" in Ethiopia, known as the Falashas, are Jews descended from the tribe of Dan.

During the course of research on the "lost communities" I have found that this was also the opinion of two leading authorities of the sixteenth century, Rabbi David Ibn-Zimra and Rabbi Yakov Castro, known in rabbinic circles as the "Radbaz" and "Maharikash," respectively.

This is not the place to quote their responses in full, but suffice it to say that Rabbi David Ibn-Zimra urged a Falasha who sought a divorce from his Jewish wife to give her the "Get" (Jewish divorce) for the reason that "the Falashas are Jews, descended from the tribe of Dan."

Some time ago, when I discussed this subject with

Chief Rabbi Yossef, he confirmed my findings and said that he, too, based his ruling on the above-mentioned rabbis. He added, however, that he was very disappointed to see that the Israeli authorities were not doing their best to hasten the Falashas' emigration to Israel.

Many years ago the Israeli government and the Jewish Agency helped the "Karaites" to come to Israel, and even built synagogues for them. In fact, the late president Itzhak Ben-Zvi was instrumental in building the present Karaite synagogue in Ramle which bears his name.

Under the Law of the Return the Karaites fully enjoy all the privileges accorded to other immigrants on arrival, and up to the present day the Karaites receive grants from the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

Yet all this was done despite the fierce opposition of the religious authorities of the time, among them the Late Rabbi Pesach Frank (then Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem), who insisted that the Karaites should not be allowed to settle in Israel under the Law of the Return, since they were rejected centuries ago from Klal Israel. Several dayanim, including the renowned Rabbi Eliezer Feldman, Av Beth Din of Jerusalem, still refuse to accept the Karaites.

Their view is in accordance with the Shulchan Aruch (Eben Haezer, Ch. 4), which states that the Karaites are illegitimate and cannot intermarry with other Jewish communities. However, the present Sephardi Chief

Rabbi, relying on other authorities, rules that they can intermarry with other communities, without even a "symbolic conversion" involving immersion in the mikva. His ruling is evidently to the liking of the Israeli Government.

But, with the Falashas, despite the express desire of Chief Rabbi Yossef to rehabilitate them in Israel and their willingness to undergo the symbolic immersion, and with no opposition from other religious authorities, the Israeli authorities are still ignoring their plight. The truth is—as one prominent Israeli has put it—that the refusal of the Israeli authorities is due entirely to "the colour of their skin" and not because of their religious status.

Chief Rabbi Immanuel Jakobovits urged families to buy the matzot which the Soviet authorities refused to deliver to Jews in Russia. He also requested that during the seder an appropriate declaration be made, as a reminder of their plight. I believe a similar declaration should have been made regarding the Falashas who could not celebrate the festival of freedom in their homeland due to the refusal of the Israeli Government.

Those who truly care about the plight of the Falashas should get together and try to find ways to facilitate their emigration from Ethiopia. And if the Israeli authorities continue to ignore their plight, then surely there are Batei Din in Jewish communities elsewhere who will accept them and give them the opportunity to live freely as Jews.

Exotic Customs Of The High Holy Days

By PAUL SHAW

We are all familiar with apples and honey (for a "fruitful and sweet year"), but how many families in Anglo-Jewry will serve a ram's head on Rosh Hashana evening? The origins of this custom—apparently one of the most widespread in the diaspora—are obscure.

It was, at one time, connected with a biblical quotation that, in the coming year, those who took part in it should be "at the head and not at the tail" of events. In many other communities, it was a point of emphasis that heads were not removed from fish served on Rosh Hashana.

The belief, was certainly widespread that the food one ate could be served as an omen (hopefully for good), for one's fortunes in the coming year. This seems to have had its origin in Talmudic passage (Kerit 6a), where the rabbis are discussing the effects of various foods on temperament and fortune. The discussion is closed by a certain rabbi who says (and one may detect a certain twinkle in the original rabbinic eye): "Well, if that's the case, you should eat pumpkin, fenugreek, leek, beet and dates on Rosh Hashana"—because the names of all these foods in Aramaic are puns on biblical quotations referring to assorted good fortune.

His suggestion, however, has been adopted with alacrity in Jewish communities throughout the ages, and no table in a Yemeni Jewish household would be complete without a dish containing each of these vegetables.

Also eaten on Rosh Hashana night were pomegranates and, as another symbol of fruitfulness, fish. Chalos were shaped like ladders in some communities as symbolic of the High Holy day theme of reaching to heaven; in others, like mountains; and, as in Western Europe, in circular shapes, to which was later attributed the symbolic of the never-ending cycle of life.

During the week before Rosh Hashana, several special prayers—Selichot—are recited in the daily synagogue service. In former times the shamash (beadle) of the synagogue would have a special hammer with which he would tour the village in the early mornings, banging on the doors to awaken the inhabitants so that they could rise for prayer. In Sana's, in the Yemen, the local rabbi and his Beth Din would tour in procession from synagogue to synagogue, handing out leaflets and giving sermons exhorting the local population to "teshuvah" (repentance).

It was the custom in some places to abstain from any "secular" conversation at all throughout the month of Elul (as it was to abstain from any speech at all, other than prayer, on Rosh Hashana itself). Among the various practices of fasting during the time preceding Rosh Hashana—and, in some places, on Rosh Hashana itself—the Bene Israel of India deserve special mention. They fast during daytime hours for 40 days preceding the New Year. During this time it is also their practice to re-whitewash their houses. Although discouraged by many

eminent rabbis, the custom of Tashlich is still widely observed. This most interesting ceremony, whose history has been traced in a classic essay by J.Z. Lauterbach, consists in essence of a symbolic casting of sins (representing by breadcrumbs) into water. At an earlier time, the main criterion of suitable water was not (as seems to be accepted today) that it should be flowing water, but that it should be water in which fish swam. The custom, in some communities is to throw crumbs; others shake out their garments into the water. Those with special enthusiasm may care to note the custom in Kurdistan where, after reciting the Tashlich prayer, the community would actually jump, fully-clothed, into the river and swim around. Normally carried out on the first day of Rosh Hashana, Tashlich is observed in some communities on erev-Rosh Hashana; in others during the days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur; and otherwise on erev Yom Kippur.

Kapparot

Perhaps the most exotic of the High Holy day customs, always guaranteed to raise rationalist eyebrows, is the "kapparot" ceremony on erev Yom Kippur, where a chicken or a cock is swung around one's head and then slaughtered, while a wish is expressed that the death of the animal should serve instead of any adverse decree due to be visited on the person carrying out the ceremony. Like other customs—to take one example, Tashlich—which tended to give the impression that there was some mechanical way in which people could avert personal and spiritual responsibility for their misdeeds—"kapparot" was very strongly criticised by many eminent rabbis.

In later years, what may be termed "aesthetic objections" grew. But it is interesting to note that the earliest record of "kapparot" (dating from about the eighteenth century) does not involve animals at all. "It was the custom in older times to braid baskets for each of the small children of the house, about 15 or 20 days before Rosh Hashana. The baskets were filled with dirt

and manure, and sowed with wheat, barley, Egyptian beans and peas. The plants grew about half a foot. Then each of the children would take his basket on the eve of Rosh Hashana and swing it about his head seven times, and say: "This instead of me, this is my exchange, this is my substitute, and throw it into a stream." Note the connection again, with water.

Fasting on Yom Kippur is, of course, de rigueur; but the crypto-Jews of the Catholic world (the Marranos, or more accurately, Conversos) wished to be seen not to be fasting on that day. Charles Liebman recorded the practise (in the twentieth century) of descendants of crypto-Jews living in Mexico City whose custom it was to walk through the City parks

on Yom Kippur with toothpicks in their mouths!

In our days of "authorized" prayerbooks and synagogue by-laws, we tend to lose the local customs which "personalized" Jewish observance in other days and this, "rams" heads notwithstanding, is, I think, a real loss. Doubtless, many readers will have their own family and community customs to recall over the coming festivals. But one local custom—and it is only a custom—remains absolutely at the forefront of our contemporary observance—the recital of the Kol Nidre prayer, whose origins are more or less unknown and whose meaning remains surrounded in mystery.

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Rabin Prefers Step-by-Step

Vienna - [JCN] - Israel's former Prime Minister, Itzhak Rabin, has called for a return to Dr. Henry Kissinger's step-by-step diplomacy. Speaking here during a stop-over while en route for the annual European Forum, in the Tyrolean village of Alpbach, Mr. Rabin blamed current American misconceptions about the role of the Palestine Liberation

Organization on its lack of experience and he hoped that Washington would soon realize its mistakes.

He reiterated that his Government had received written commitments from Washington that America would not deal with the PLO unless the latter recognized both Israel's right of existence.

Ask The Rabbi

Question:
Is the fasting on Yom Kippur more important than the atoning, or vice versa, or can they not be separated?

Answer:
I am puzzled by your reference to the "atoning". It is God who pardons sins. Our part in the process is to repent of the sins. If you mean by "atoning" the act of repentance, there can only be one answer to your question: both repentance and fasting are important.

While Rabbi Judah the Prince held that Yom Kippur atones even without repentance (the sages disagreeing), even he states that the obligation to fast on Yom Kippur is a quite separate obligation and, indeed, holds that for the Yom Kippur offence of not fasting there is no pardon without repentance.

The whole point here is that a distinction must be made between the effects of Yom Kippur and the observance of Yom Kippur. The effects of Yom Kippur are that atonement is made and sins are pardoned by God. Fasting, on the other hand, belongs in the category of Yom Kippur observance. This is what Yom Kippur means and this is how the day is observed.

Your question is really not very different from: "Is the giving of charity more important than satisfying the needs of the poor?" This is not a significant question, since giving charity is the act, while satisfying the needs of the poor is its outcome.

If you mean to ask, as I rather suspect, whether mechanical observance of this fast is sufficient, then the answer is, of course—as in all other such matters—inwardness (kavanah) is certainly the ideal. And yet to fast without inwardness is no sin, while to have inwardness and pious thoughts without fasting is to commit a serious sin.

Judaism attaches the greatest significance to the act, to doing the will of God, not merely to thinking about it.

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Past Posts

50 Years Ago

Montreal—Joseph Shubert was appointed Acting Mayor of Montreal for a period of three months. Mr. Shubert is a Jewish labor alderman.

Mr. Shubert's first public appearance as Acting Mayor was when he addressed the British Empire Metalurgical Congress.

Jerusalem—A strict quarantine for visitors from Persia, Iraq and adjacent regions affected by cholera was instituted by the authorities. The cholera epidemic started in Persia. Several regions of Iraq were also infected. Two hundred and fifty deaths were recorded there during the last two weeks.

The governments of Syria, Egypt and Transjordan have also instituted a minimum quarantine of five days.

25 Years Ago

Washington (JTA)—The Very Rev. Francis B. Sayre, Jr., Dean of the Washington Cathedral, has rejected criticism by "fellow churchmen" of the removal of a cross to make room for the Ark of the Covenant when the Cathedral was used by Temple Sina, a Reform congregation, which was loaned the use of the church.

Reports of the removal of the cross during the first service held by the Jewish congregation in the church brought protests from Episcopalians throughout the nation. Dean Sayre, however, has announced a new arrangement

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Reader Writes

School Standards Declining

To the Editor:

There is a group of children in the Winnipeg Hebrew Day school system that is being discriminated against. They are not being given the quality of education they want and can very easily handle. Some of the teachers therefore are not giving their best.

I am in complete agreement that our local Hebrew day schools should give a Jewish/Hebrew education to each and every Jewish child in the community. More is possibly better? The schools should not be "elitist" and cater to the few young people who undoubtedly shall make a vital contribution to the community of today and tomorrow.

Alternately, academic standards have been considerably lowered to give equal opportunity to each child in the schools.

Competent dedicated teachers who care are no longer being challenged. Brighter students are no longer challenged. The result is boredom and the putting in of time on the part of students and some teachers. Students that are able and want to have higher and more challenging academic standards are unable to obtain it. They are bored, unchallenged and frequently some of these brighter children disrupt the classroom.

Too, school costs escalate even

Engagement

Mr. and Mrs. Ernest Browder are happy to announce the engagement of their daughter, Resa to Shelley Ostrove, son of Mr. and Mrs. Michael Ostrove. The wedding will take place at the B'nai Abraham Synagogue in December, 1977.

Mr. and Mrs. G. Donner of Cleveland, Ohio are happy to announce the engagement and wedding of their granddaughter Deborah Jaye Evans to Wayne William Braunstein, son of Mr. and Mrs. Al Braunstein, of Winnipeg. The wedding will take place on Oct. 16, 1977 in the Bray Abraham Synagogue.

further due to having to hire Resource teachers to help students unable to cope with the pared down to the bone curriculum with the lowered academic standards.

Somehow, the feeling persists that the open system has been implemented, "in part", to acquire increased funds from the Winnipeg Jewish Community Council and the Winnipeg School Division. More bodies equal more dollars.

The Winnipeg Jewish Community Council should continue with the policy of a Jewish education for all. However, they should also concern themselves with the students and teachers that need and are able to do

more and want more.

There could possibly be two different levels of academic expectations within the schools. This would not lead to labelling or segregation. Each youngster would find their own level at which to learn most effectively. This in turn would give each and every one of them a greater sense of self worth and accomplishment. The end result of this would be that in the long run everyone in the community shall benefit.

The schools are now indeed "elitist" but in whose favour?

Name Withheld By Request

'Journey Into Our Heritage' Draws 200,000 in Western Tour

The Jewish Historical Society of Western Canada reports an attendance of 200,000 visitors to its travel exhibit, "Journey Into Our Heritage", during its 16 month, seven city tour of Western Canada, which closed July 4 at the Manitoba Museum of Man & Nature in Winnipeg.

More important than number of visitors, states Harry Gutkin, vice-president and exhibit chairman, is the quality of comment made by them. The exhibit has brought credit to the entire Jewish community, and everyone can be justifiably proud of this achievement.

Funded by the National Museums of Canada and by private subscription, the exhibit was made possible by the Society's extensive archival holdings, which comprise some 4500 photographs, 12,000 cross index classification cards, 20 feet of 50 documents, several hundred slides, and three films.

As a direct result of these archival holdings, the JHS plays an increasingly important role as a resource center for students at every educational level, teachers and professors, authors, publishers, radio and television producers, etc. The Society performs a valuable educational and public relations function, as not only do present day Jewish students have an opportunity to learn of their

cultural heritage, but non-Jewish researchers gain an awareness and understanding of the Jewish people.

All Jewish organizations are urged to maintain their own archives, and to make adequate provision for their safekeeping by turning them over to the Jewish Historical Society. Please telephone the Society's office at 942-4822 and discuss the matter with archivist Esther Nisenholt. Everyone is urged to support the work of the Society by becoming a member (family dues are a nominal fee) and by using its tribute cards.

New Ointment Helps to Combat Skin Cancer

New York - Arrangements have been concluded for the manufacture and worldwide distribution of an ointment which is a promising treatment for some forms of skin cancer, Rose E. Matzkin, chairman of the Hadassah Medical Organization, announced at Hadassah's 63rd annual national convention. The medication was developed by scientists at the Hadassah-Hebrew University Medical Center in Jerusalem.

The therapy, developed by Dr. Adam Bekierkust of the Medical Bacteriology Dept. of the medical school and Dr. Haim Cohen of the Dermatology and Venereology departments of the hospital, is the result of research going on for the past eight years on the biological activities of Cord Factor. While living BCG has been known to be effective in treating some cancers, it is difficult to use in skin cancer where large areas are affected. However, the killed BCG ointment, with Cord Factor added, is easily spread on a large area, and has proven to be very effective therapeutically.

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