

Ethiopian-Israeli Protests

On April 26, 2015, Israeli police officers assaulted and arrested an Ethiopian-Israeli who was in his IDF uniform. A video of the incident went viral, sparking Ethiopian-Israeli protests against discrimination and alleged police brutality against the Ethiopian community.¹ The demonstrations occurred during the Baltimore riots in the U.S., prompting claims that Israel suffers from the same institutional racism as the U.S. While some Israelis harbor racial prejudices, as individuals do in every country, equating the challenges faced by black Americans and Ethiopian Israelis is deeply misguided. While Ethiopian Israelis do face difficult obstacles, they have worked hard to close the gaps that exist and Israel has taken steps to empower them.²

Israel is, “the only nation in history to bring tens of thousands of Africans (Ethiopian Jews) out of Africa to be citizens, not slaves” - Pennsylvania State Senator and civil rights activist Anthony Hardy Williams.³

- At great risk and in massive, challenging operations, Israel brought in over 80,000 Ethiopian Jews through airlifts and other means between 1985 and 2013.⁴ Israel helped them escape from severe religious persecution, famine and war.⁵ Today there are over 135,000 Ethiopian Israelis.
- Many Israelis were jubilant and lined the streets to welcome the Ethiopian immigrants when the airlifts began.⁶ Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir greeted them in 1991 in a special ceremony.
- Ethiopian immigrants went to absorption centers to learn Hebrew and adapt to Israel’s modernized society, which contrasted starkly with village life in Ethiopia.⁷ Many had never seen common Israeli fixtures like staircases or windows.⁸

While some older Ethiopian immigrants had difficulty adapting, those who came as children or were born in Israel are beginning to match the achievements of other Israelis.

- “The high school graduation rate among Ethiopian Israelis who moved to Israel at an older age is only 36%. In comparison, the rate of high school graduates among those who were educated in Israel is about 90%, a similar rate to the rest of the Jewish population,” according to a Taub Center for Social Policies Report.⁹
- Ethiopian-Israelis educated in Israel are 3 times more likely to earn an academic degree than those who arrived at older ages, and have double the employment rate in high-skilled jobs.¹⁰
- A growing number have risen to the top of the public sphere. Ethiopian-Israelis now serve in Israel’s Knesset, and in 2012 Israel appointed its first Ethiopian-born ambassador.¹¹ Ethiopian-Israeli beauty queen Yityish Aynaw was crowned Miss Israel in 2013. Israel only had one long-distance runner in the last summer Olympics: Zohar Zimro. In his words, “To make aliyah as a child from Ethiopia and to end up representing Israel in the Olympics is the closing of a circle—a Cinderella story.”¹²

When the video of the police beating went viral, Israeli officials and the public denounced the action.

- The two policemen involved were fired, and Israel’s Police Commissioner declared their behavior unacceptable.¹³
- Prime Minister Netanyahu met personally with the Ethiopian soldier, and declared, “We cannot accept inflammatory rhetoric, racism, looking down on people and the beating of an IDF officer.”¹⁴
- President Reuven Rivlin validated the protestors’ concerns and spoke to their character. “We’ve erred. We have failed to see and listen enough. Among those protesting in the streets, there can be found the best of our boys and girls, excellent students and former soldiers.”¹⁵

Israel pledged to implement more programs to help Ethiopian Israelis close the gaps.

- A new ministerial committee was created specifically for the integration of Ethiopian-Israelis, focusing on “education, housing, employment, culture and religious issues”.¹⁶
- Israel pledged to provide government assistance and increase mortgage help in 2016.¹⁷
- Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu repeatedly stated that education about Israel’s Ethiopian community is crucial. The Ethiopian holiday of Sigd was made national holiday, and Israel’s curriculum is being updated to include its traditions and ceremonies.¹⁸

¹ Ben Hartman, “Israeli-Ethiopian protesters return to Tel Aviv to rally against police brutality, racism,” *Jerusalem Post*, May 18, 2015 at <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Israeli-Ethiopian-protesters-return-to-Tel-Aviv-to-rally-against-police-brutality-racism-403444>

² Jewish Virtual Library, “Ethiopian Jewry: The Situation of Ethiopian Jews in Israel,” Jewish Virtual Library, at <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/ejdesc.html>

³ Anthony Hardy Williams, “The racism of the Israel-bashers,” *New York Post*, April 11, 2014, at <http://nypost.com/2014/04/11/the-racism-of-the-israel-bashers/>

⁴ Jewish Virtual Library, “Immigration to Israel: Total Immigration from Ethiopia,” *Jewish Virtual Library*, at www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/ejim.html

⁵ Jewish Virtual Library, “Ethiopia,” *Jewish Virtual Library*, at <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/ejhist.html#top>

⁶ AP, “‘Lost Tribe’ Returns Home To Israel -- Dramatic Airlift Of 15,000 Ethiopian Jews Completed,” *Seattle Times*, May 26, 1991 at <http://community.seattletimes.nwsources.com/archive/?date=19910526&slug=1285429>

⁷ Israel Association for Ethiopian Jews, “Operation Moses,” *Israel Association for Ethiopian Jews* at http://www.ic-creations.com/Ethiopian-Community/pages/history_operation_moses.htm

⁸ Edward Serotta, “Ethiopian Jews Survive Their ‘Holocaust,’ Adjust to Daily Life,” *Orlando Sentinel*, October 25, 1987 at http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/1987-10-25/news/0150400288_1_ethiopian-jews-operation-moses-soldier

⁹ Tali Heruti-Sover and Lior Datel, “Ethiopian Israelis earn 35% less than average, but the gap is shrinking,” *Ha’aretz*, June 25, 2015 at <http://www.haaretz.com/business/.premium-1.662910>

¹⁰ Taub Center for Policy Studies in Israel, “Education and Employment Trends Among Ethiopian Israelis,” *Taub Center for Policy Studies in Israel*, June 25, 2015 at <http://taubcenter.org.il/education-and-employment-trends-among-ethiopian-israelis-2/>

¹¹ Herb Keinon, “J’lem appoints first Ethiopian-born ambassador,” *Jerusalem Post*, February 28, 2012 at <http://www.jpost.com/Diplomacy-and-Politics/Jlem-appoints-first-Ethiopian-born-ambassador>

¹² Danny Caro, “Zohar’s going for gold,” *The Jewish Chronicle*, July 19, 2012 at <http://www.thejc.com/sport/sport-news/70282/zohars-going-gold>

¹³ Jonathan Beck, “Police chief: Cop filmed beating soldier to be fired,” *Times of Israel*, April 29, 2015 at <http://www.timesofisrael.com/police-chief-cop-filmed-beating-soldier-to-be-fired/>

¹⁴ Batsheva Sobelman, “Netanyahu meets with victim of videotaped police beating, promises action,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 4, 2015 at <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-netanyahu-videotape-police-beating-20150504-story.html>

¹⁵ Jonathan Lis, “President Rivlin to Ethiopian Israelis: We’ve failed to listen to you,” *Haaretz*, May 4, 2015 at <http://www.haaretz.com/news/israel/.premium-1.654876>

¹⁶ Arutz Sheva Staff, “Netanyahu Vows to Fix Discrimination Against Ethiopians,” *Arutz Sheva*, June 2, 2015 at <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/196173#.VZRcUvm4RD8>

¹⁷ Prime Minister’s Office, “Cabinet Approves Plan to Improve the Absorption of Ethiopian Immigrants,” *Prime Minister’s Office* at <http://www.pmo.gov.il/english/mediacenter/spokesman/pages/spokeklita130512.aspx>

¹⁸ Dr. Ruchama Weiss, Rabbi Levi Brackman, “Ethiopian Sigd made official State Holiday,” *Ynet*, July 2, 2008 at <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3562939,00.html>