

# Fascinating INSIGHTS

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### Ethiopian Jews

In a ruling written on February 9, 1973 (א' שבט 5733), R' Ovadia Yosef established that Ethiopian Jews of the Falasha tribe, known as Beta Israel, are completely Jewish and may marry other Jews without conversion.<sup>1</sup> This was in response to a question asked by the Falasha tribe leaders who assured R' Ovadia that they would be completely observant in Israel. Before this, the Beta Israel were asked to convert, under R' Yitzchok Isaac Herzog's ruling to stay on the safe side when only a small number moved to Israel.

At first, R' Ovadia's colleagues as well as the government opposed his liberal ruling and he maintained his stance alone. On March 3, two years later, R' Ovadia convinced the government to open its doors to Ethiopian

immigrants in order to prevent their assimilation. This law was legislated with his name. Over the coming decades, many thousands of Ethiopian Jews immigrated to Israel thanks to the ruling of R' Ovadia.<sup>2</sup> They were educated in religious schools, due in part to R' Ovadia's political intervention.

R' Ovadia was later joined by other authorities who made similar rulings. On the other hand, there were those that countered his view including R' Shach, R' Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, R' Elyashiv and R' Moshe Feinstein. They considered the Jewishness of the Beta Israel doubtful.

The Ethiopian Jews' chief rabbi, R' Yosef Hadana, immigrated to Israel in 1972 and aided R' Ovadia in his research into the Jewishness of Beta Israel. R' Ovadia studied the subject thoroughly. He listened to tourists who visited Ethiopia, learned rabbinical opinions and asked the members of the community.<sup>3</sup> One night he called R' Hadana after midnight in order to hear verbatim what community members said at wedding ceremonies. This was part of R' Ovadia's research toward his ruling that the Falashas were not *mamzerim* because their weddings were not halachic marriages.

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### Welcoming Words

It is not for naught that it took 120 years to build the תיבה, ark.<sup>4</sup> People were saying to Noach, "why are you wasting your time with constructing the תיבה? Come have a good time with us!" People nowadays say the same: why waste your time with spiritual pursuits? Enjoy your time in this world! Just as in the time of Noach the Mabul ensued, the same is awaiting one who does likewise in this world—after his 120 years. This is in contrast to one who utilizes his time in this world properly.

<sup>2</sup> Most of the community made Aliyah from Ethiopia to Israel in two waves of mass immigration assisted by the Israeli government: Operation Moses (1984-85) and Operation Solomon (1991). Operation Moses was the covert evacuation of Ethiopian Jews from Sudan during a civil war that caused a famine in 1984. Thousands of Beta Israel had fled Ethiopia on foot for refugee camps in Sudan, a journey which usually took anywhere from two weeks to a month. It is estimated as many as 4,000 died during the journey, due to violence and illness along the way. Over the course of seven weeks, beginning on November 21, 1984, more than 30 flights brought 8,000 Ethiopian Jews from refugee camps in Sudan to Israel. On May 24-25, 1991, Operation Solomon transported 14,325 Ethiopian Jews to Israel aboard IDF, El-Al, and Ethiopian Airlines aircrafts within 36 hours. In order to accommodate as many people as possible, airplanes were stripped of their seats, and due to the low body weight and minimal baggage of the refugees, many more people boarded the planes. Many of the immigrants came with nothing except their clothes and cooking instruments. One of the aircrafts, an El-Al 747, carried at least 1,088 people, including two babies who were born on the flight, and holds the world record for the most passengers on an aircraft. In total, eight children were born during the airlift process.

<sup>3</sup> Part of his research included interviews with members of Beta Israel. A number of members mentioned that they were so careful about contact with gentiles, that they would immerse in the river each time they had to meet a non-Jew for business reasons. This played a part in his decision.

<sup>4</sup> Breishis, 6:14, Rashi.

<sup>1</sup> Yabia Omer, volume 8, Even Haezer 11.

The word תיבה means an ark as well as a word. Just as when one enters a תיבה he is saved from a physical Mabul, similarly when we enter into the words of Torah and Tefila we are saved from a spiritual Mabul.<sup>5</sup> This can be compared to the following: One can be in a country such as Egypt. However, when he is in the embassy of the United States there, it is as if he is in the United States. We can apply the same to one that is in the Beis Midrash, although there is a whole other world out there.

So, the physical תיבה also alludes to a spiritual תיבה. This is shown in the following:

A) The dimensions of the תיבה (300 by 50 by 30 Amos) is the sum of the letters of the word לשון (ל is 30 in Gematria, ש is 300 and נ is 50) hinting to us that we should utilize our faculty of speech appropriately—for Torah, Tefilla, encouraging others and so on.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, an allusion to this is found in the words: צהר תעשה לתיבה: we should make our words (translating תיבה as a word) light. It comes as no coincidence that the first letters of מות וחייהם, death and life are in the power of the tongue, spell מבול, as real life is one filled with spirituality.

B) The word תיבה is an abbreviation for תפלה ישראל בכונה בלב, proper Tefila with Kavana.

C) Let us take the letters of Hashem's name יהוה and multiply it with the letters of אדני since that is the way it is pronounced. Multiplying יהוה (יהוה), which has a numerical value of 10, with אדני (אדני), we get 10. ד (4) with ה (5) is 20. Together this totals 30. ו (6) and נ (50) is 300 whereas ה (5) and י (10) is 50. This is the exact dimensions of the תיבה, as the length was 300, width 50 and the height 30! Not surprisingly, the word תיבה is comprised of the letters בית ה', the house of Hashem.

D) In Maariv we say נשיה בהקיד...תורתך... we will discuss your decrees, we will rejoice in the words of your Torah and with your Mitzvos. This can also be a reference to the תיבה, as it represents spirituality. So, נשיה is an acronym for those who were in the תיבה—יפת, חם, שם, חם.

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### Momentous Moment

How do we overcome temptations—whether it is a test not to eat something or looking at the improper and so on?

Thinking that this test will always arise can lead to despairing thoughts. To overcome temptation we need to take it one day at a time. A story about when the Steipler was in the Russian army illustrates this point. One freezing cold Shabbos, the coat he would wear was on a tree. Not wanting to transgress that which is forbidden on Shabbos, he asked himself every few minutes if he needed the coat. Each time he felt he could go another

few minutes without it. In this way he made it through the cold night without the coat. In this light, the Chasam Sofer interprets ואתם הדבקים...היום<sup>8</sup> to cling to Hashem by overcoming the Yetzer Hara, חיים כולכם היום, take it day by day.

In a similar way, this is how Yosef overcame the test with the wife of Potifar as it says יום יום as he took it one day at a time.<sup>9</sup> We see the same by Mordechai in that he didn't bow to Haman, as it says יום ויום.<sup>10</sup> What was the outcome of this? Yosef and Mordechai each became the viceroy!

With his solid faith and endurance, Andrew Burian, who survived the Birkenau and Mauthausen concentration camps as well as the infamous death march evacuations for each camp, has inspired tens of thousands of people. He revealed with the following story how he survived the Holocaust. It was January 18, 1945 when they began the infamous death march, marching out of Birkenau to the Gleiwitz railroad station, more than 30 miles away. People were constantly being killed by the Germans. Andrew was malnourished and had rags on his feet instead of shoes and was freezing to death. Stumbling or not keeping with the pace meant instant death. However, by day three he couldn't motivate himself to march any longer. Consequently, he began to slow down and despair. The man near him noticed his weakening, and asked him do you see the steeple on that building? That's where we need to reach and we will then have arrived at our destination. Then Andrew thought, "I can hold out until that steeple, as I can see it up ahead." When they reached the steeple and didn't stop Andrew turned to the man who quickly responded, "Not this one. The one just up ahead." This scene continued to repeat itself until he understood the message—that a person can motivate himself to do anything so as long as there is a goal in sight. With this thought, he motivated himself to walk mile after mile, steeple after steeple.

An undertaking can seem insurmountable. However, little by little we can overcome it. This is what Daf Yomi does as the entire shas can seem impossible. With a Daf daily, the goal of finishing shas is achievable. To help us with an overwhelming task we should focus only on the day and hour before us. Otherwise, it can seem too large a burden. A successful life is the cumulative outcome of many successful minutes, hours and days. Building a tall brick wall can seem overwhelming but putting brick by brick isn't. Nevertheless, we still benefit by envisioning the tall sturdy brick wall before we begin.

People that have climbed the K2 mountain (in which many people have died trying to do so), which is the second-highest mountain (after Mount Everest), were asked how they managed to do it. Expecting to hear some complicated answer, the reporters were surprised by the answer: "One step at a time!"

Rabbi Alt merited to learn under the tutelage of R' Mordechai Friedlander ztz"l for close to five years. He received semicha from R' Zalman Nechemia Goldberg ztz"l. Rabbi Alt has written on numerous topics for various websites and publications and is the author of the books, Fascinating Insights and Incredible Insights in addition to being the host of The Fascinating Insights Podcast. His writings, some of which have been translated into Hebrew, German and French, inspire people across the spectrum of Jewish observance to live with the vibrancy and beauty of Torah. He lives with his wife and family in Kiryat Yearim (where the Aron was for 20 years [Shmuel 1, 7:1,2]) where he studies, writes and teaches. The author is passionate about teaching Jews of all levels of observance.

<sup>5</sup> This world is like a stormy sea. One should imagine as if he is swimming, lifting his head above so that he doesn't drown. He must protect the waves that come toward him (See Sefer Charedim 66:100). Indeed, טבע, nature also means to drown as one can drown in this world. One can be saved from dangerous waters with a rope. So, it says כי חלק עמו יעקב חבל נחלתו, Hashem's portion is His people, Yaakov is the measure of His inheritance. That is, one must cling to Hashem and do His will just as our ancestors did.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that when the Gemara (Pesachim 3a) teaches one shouldn't emit a coarse expression from his mouth it brings a Pasuk dealing with the תיבה of Noach—מן הבהמה הטהורה... of the clean animal, of the animal that is not clean... (Breishis 7:8).

<sup>7</sup> Mishlei 18:21.

<sup>8</sup> Devarim 4:4.

<sup>9</sup> Breishis 39:10. See Yoma 35b, Shabbos 105b.

<sup>10</sup> Esther 3:4.