

Alliance and Alienation Ethiopia and Israel in the Days of Haile Selassie

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Haggai Erlich is a renowned Israeli historian and an Ethiopianist, and this is not the first time he is writing about Ethiopia. One of his excellent books on Ethiopia put out by the Lynne Rienner Publishers in 1986 is *Ethiopia and the Challenge of Independence*. What makes *Alliance and Alienation* different is the fact that the book is heavily focused on diplomacy and intelligence with respect to the Ethiopian-Israeli relations. The book also provides the reader some secretly conducted diplomatic ventures and investments of the Israeli Government as well as the unofficial sojourn of Israeli leaders in Ethiopia.

Moreover, what makes *Alliance and Alienation* significant is the fact that the author renders hitherto unclassified and interesting anecdotes in relation to Emperor Haile Selassie's swinging political pendulum in regards to the recognition of Israel and its admission to the United Nations. The Israelis were unable to fathom Haile Selassie's unpredictable political stances vis-à-vis Israel in spite of their commitment to Ethiopia, especially in augmenting its defense forces.

While the historical linkage between Ethiopia and Israel in this book was mostly based on mythology rather than historiography, the relations of the two countries after the 1950s nonetheless is more or less cemented by mutual interests in warding off Arab foe-ridden politics, or by "regional strategy" as the author puts it. However, as Haggai explicitly presents it in the Foreword to the Book, Ethiopia was viewed as "Peripheral Alliance", which was supposed to comprise Turkey, Iran, Ethiopia, and Israel; and the purpose of the Alliance was "to counter the pro-Soviet momentum of revolutionary pan-Arabism."

Chapter One of the Book is about "Legacies of the past and conceptual dichotomies," and as I have indicated above, the narrative is characterized by mythology and oral tradition, mainly based on one important Ethiopian book, namely, *The Glory of Kings*. I am using the word 'mythology' in this review not in its negative sense to mean unfounded or fabricated but in its positive sense to reinforce the kernel of a people's belief system or social thought. In this context, thus, the mythology is the relations of Queen Saba (Sheba) of Ethiopia and King Solomon of Israel, by which Ethiopia and Israel are permanently interlinked forever and they could not be separated. However, this outlook is entertained by predominantly Christian and Semitic Ethiopians like the Tigray, Amhara, and other related people, although the Kaffa kings for power legitimacy purposes also adopted it.

Chapter Two is on 'friendly acquaintance and disappointment' and here the author argues, "Jerusalem was closer to the hearts of Ethiopian Christians than any other community in the world." Haggai substantiates his argument by attributing the construction of the rock-hewn churches to King Lalibela in the 12th century, who apparently was imitating Jerusalem or conceptually transplanting it unto Ethiopia.

Although we know that all eleven rock hewn churches in Lalibela were not built by King Lalibela alone, there is no doubt that the Zagwe Dynasty kings had ambitions to move Jerusalem to Ethiopia not just for piety but also in light of the holy city becoming a bone of contention between the Crusaders and the Muslims.

Haggai also argues that Emperor Tewodros II "saw himself as savior of Jerusalem from Muslims," which is a historical fact. I myself have indicated in my debut book, *Ethiopia: The Political Economy of Transition* (1995) that Tewodros' motto, 'The husband of Ethiopia and Fiancé of Jerusalem', written in Amharic and Arabic, was engraved on his coin mint.

The disappointment for the Israelis, as discussed in this chapter, has to do with Ethiopia's unwillingness to recognize Israel in 1948 and also vote in favor of its admission to the UN. "Ethiopia officially recognized Israel only thirteen years later." Thus, Chapter Three still discusses the evolution of Ethiopian political diplomacy from "Reluctance to Recognition, 1948-1961." "The Ethiopian attitude toward Israel," says Haggai, "was much more complex and fraught with contradictory statements of intimacy and rejection, like problematical family." (P. 58)

As far as the author is concerned, from the birth of the Israeli state in 1948 to 1956, the Ethiopian-Israeli relations were characterized by a "bumpy road" and by Haile Selassie's "game of hidden promises". This period coincided with the federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia endorsed by the United Nations and supported by countries like Egypt. It is therefore understandable why Ethiopians were at best evading and at worst ignoring the question of a legitimate Israeli state.

By 1959, however, the relations of Ethiopia and Egypt would deteriorate when Sudan and Egypt signed an agreement on the Nile by excluding Ethiopia and when Haile Selassie, in 1957, "had declared that any Nile agreement that ignores the rights of Ethiopia would be perceived as aggression." (P. 74)

Time and again, the book raises the issue of the Falasha or the Ethiopian Jews or the Bete Israel, as they call themselves. As indicated in the Introduction of the book, the conventional mold of thinking or the implicit assumption is that the Bete Israel came to Ethiopia along with Menelik I, the son of Solomon and Sheba, and therefore it is legitimate for the Falasha to immigrate to modern Israel. This kind of historical analysis could end up in mystique obscurity and lack of credibility. There is no doubt that the Jews were in Judea in ancient times, but the Hebrew religion (Judaism) first evolved in ancient Egypt (Kemet) and it is highly probable that the followers of this religion scattered throughout the Middle East including Ethiopia.

Instead of settling for a convenient simplification and hypotheses maximized vis-à-vis potential generalized findings, we must always depend on documentary and archeological evidences, supported by linguistic and cultural parameters, for our historical verification. Irrespective of the historical origins of the Ethiopian Jewry, Haile Selassie "rejected the idea that the Falasha be allowed to leave his country and be defined by any other identity other than Ethiopian." (p. 80) Rather than immigrating to Israel, the Emperor agreed to grant land to the Falasha in the Humera region (p. 132) of Northwestern Ethiopia. However, beginning 1961, that is, the post-1960 abortive coup, "Haile Selassie continued to deepen his relations with Israel," (p. 90) until the relations between Ethiopia and Israel "were severed in 1973" (p. 111)

Chapter Four, which deals with "Israel in the Ethiopian Eyes," should be a required reading for Ethiopian historians and journalists, for the author craftily and systematically documented how the Ethiopian newspapers like *Addis Zaman* and *Ethiopian Herald* positively portrayed Israel. In fact, at one point, it looks that the Ethiopian media outlets were turning themselves into propaganda manifestos for Israel. Beyond this cursory interpretation, however, Haggai Erlich's logical synthesis makes a lot of sense: "It cannot be overstated: no other country [Israel] received so much individual attention in Ethiopia at the time. This intense interest must be explained in light of historical proximity on one hand, and the general sense the closeness contained more than only a cultural and historical dimension. *It was like having a strong friend at a time of need.*" (Emphasis mine pp. 116-117)

In Chapter Five, the reader will encounter "comprehensive Israeli involvement" in Ethiopia, not only in defense but also in designing curricula and upgrading academic departments at Haile Selassie I University (now Addis Ababa University), but as indicated in Chapter Six this promising initiative will be frustrated by the Six-Day Arab-Israeli war of 1967 which culminated in the expulsion of Israel from Ethiopia in 1973.

According to Haggai Erlich, the "best years" in Ethiopian-Israeli relations and in Ethiopia's Middle East policy are 1967 to 1969, but this does not mean Ethiopia was favoring Israel at the risk of infuriating the Arab countries. On the contrary, Ethiopia under Haile Selassie, maintained well-balanced diplomatic relations toward the Middle East. "Throughout those years," Haggai says, "the Emperor's position remained clear: the Arabs must recognize and make peace; Israel must withdraw from all the territories occupied in June 1967." Moreover, Foreign Minister Ketema Yifru, in his speech at the UN on October 4 1967 reiterated that "Ethiopia has close ties with all sides in the Middle East...The main goal should be to make peace between Arab nationalism and Jewish nationalism on the basis of mutual recognition of the right of all." (p. 182)

Chapter Seven is on the breakdown of diplomatic relations of Ethiopia and Israel. In this chapter, the author discusses the pendulum-type Ethiopian diplomacy at a time when the Emperor maintained two contrasting positions in relation to Israel: "In November 1971, Haile Selassie took Asrate Kassa with him to the Presidents' meeting in Dakkar [Dakar], and he instructed his representative to abstain from voting for the anti-Israel Proposal at the UN General Assembly vote on December 20th. Immediately afterwards, however, Haile Selassie's double game went back to normal. Ethiopia returned to voting with Africans and Arabs against Israel during the entire period leading up to the Yom Kippur war..." (p. 222)

Despite the severance of relations between the two nations, however, as Haggai aptly put it in the concluding Chapter Eight, "relations between Ethiopia and Israel did not end following the 1973 break, they only changed." (p. 257)

In Chapter Seven, the ubiquitous question of the Jews of Ethiopia appears again and the author discusses the transition of the status of the Bete Israel "from neglect to recognition", but he also contends that the recognition comes a bit late. While Haggai did an excellent job in depicting the history, sentiments, and enthusiasm of the Bete Israel to immigrate to the Promised Land, he did not thoroughly examine their condition once they settled in Israel.

Back in the late 1980s or early 1990s (I can't exactly remember the exact date), I remember Haggai Erlich coming to the annual Horn of Africa conference in New York and I asked him about the Bete Israel negative encounters in Israel and he told me that they are doing well overall. But the Ethiopian Jews have indeed encountered several disadvantages in Israel as documented by local Israeli newspapers, human rights activists, and Wikipedia. For instance, in 1996, the Maáriv newspaper reported a Magen David Adom policy that was responsible for disposing off the blood donations of the Bete Israel. Upon hearing of the incident, close to ten thousand Ethiopian Jews, armed with stones, sticks, and steel rods, demonstrated in front of the Prime Minister office and clashed with the police, in which 41 police and 20 protestors were injured.

Similarly, according to Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethiopian_jews_in_israel), "a survey published by the Jerusalem Post in 2005 found that 43% of Israeli's would not marry an Ethiopian and would not want their children to marry a member of the community...in 2009, school children of Ethiopian ancestry were denied admission into three semi-private Haredi schools in Petah Tikra."

Moreover, the same Wikipedia source reveals a women's advocacy group report: "According to a TV program in 2012 female Ethiopian immigrants may have been given the Depo-Provera birth control drug without full explanation of its effects. The practice was first reported in 2010 by Isha Le-Isha, an Israeli women's organization." Similarly, I myself have watched a video in which men and women of the Bete Israel, some of them wearing Ethiopian flag T-shirts, demonstrating in protest to the unemployment of Ethiopian academics.

The Ethiopian Jews, however, have also experienced positive encounters in Israel. Some of them have been enrolled in schools for the first time in their lives; others have joined the military; some have become successful entrepreneurs; and a woman ambassador have also emerged from their midst. Haggai should have included both encounters in his book.

Alliance and Alienation: Ethiopia and Israel in the Days of Haile Selassie is a powerful historical synopsis of the Ethiopian-Israeli relations, in which the author cogently fuses the past with the present. The book, however, is not limited to the "love and hate" relationship of the two countries as implied in its title. In point of fact, the author goes deeper into the complexities of diplomacy and the intricate (and at times intriguing) bilateral and multilateral relations among countries in Africa and the Middle East, in the context of Israel's interests.

Interestingly all the data and facts incorporated in the book are further authenticated by the many pictures that fill the pages from 93 to 110. For the above reasons alone, all academics and students of history, political science, and international relations should read this book and use it as their manual for further research.

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