

The 'lost generation'

There are currently an estimated 120,000 Ethiopian Jews living in Israel, 50% of whom live below the poverty line and 63% receive some sort of governmental assistance

By [ABIGAIL PICKUS](#) 24 February 2012, 11:47 am



Ethiopian Jews sitting in the sun in Ashkelon in late January. (Photo credit: Tsafir Abayov/Flash90)

The Kiryat Malakhi incident in which a contractor refused to sell an apartment to an Ethiopian couple has all but vanished from the headlines, as has the furor raised by the thousands of protestors who took to the streets across Israel last month, but activists say much more needs to be done to end a culture of discrimination and racism against Ethiopians in Israel.

“To our dismay, discrimination is still quite prevalent,” said Itzik Dessie, Founder and Executive Director of Tebeka, the only legal aid organization founded and run by Ethiopian attorneys and professionals serving Israel’s Ethiopian community.

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Indeed, racism and discrimination against Ethiopians are ingrained in Israeli society, according to activists, with the Kiryat Melakhi incident just one of countless examples that usually go unreported. Cases abound, everything from the bus driver in Jerusalem who was eventually fired for hurling racial epithets against Ethiopian school children, to Israeli Television Channel 2’s exposure that rather than an isolated incident, 120 homeowners in Kiryat Malakhi, in the South of the country, made a secret pact not to sell to Ethiopians. If that is not bad enough, many public schools manipulate the funding they receive for new immigrants to physically segregate their Ethiopian students from the rest of the student population.

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According to Ethiopian Israeli journalist Danny Adino Ababa, “Newspaper headlines referring to displays of racism against members of Israel’s Ethiopian community are just headlines. Yet for me and for members of my community this wound gets deeper and refuses to heal,” he wrote in an op-ed in Ynet News. “What you perceive as yet another newspaper article and another passing story is a painful, sad and never-ending journey for us.”

There are currently an estimated 120,000 Israelis of Ethiopian descent living in Israel, according to Dessie. The majority of the community emigrated to Israel during two massive waves of immigration orchestrated by the Israeli government – “Operation Moses” in 1984 and “Operation Solomon” in 1991.

The community has faced many challenges from the beginning. The largest obstacle has been transitioning from an agrarian to a modern, Westernized society. Mastering Hebrew and adjusting to Israeli cultural and societal norms have also been obstacles. Add to this equation the fact that many Ethiopians were initially sent to absorption centers on the periphery of the

country, and the result is a community that is still largely isolated, with a high level of poverty, unemployment, domestic violence and youth-at-risk.

Today, 50% of Ethiopian Israelis live below the poverty line and 63% receive some sort of governmental assistance, according to Efrat Yerday, Spokeswoman for the IAEJ), an advocacy organization that works to empower the Ethiopian community.

So where is the Government in all of this?

According to Yerday, in 2008, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced a five-year plan in which the government earmarked 870 million shekel (\$231 million) for the Ethiopian community that was meant to be a wide-reaching approach to increase integration and improve socio-economic conditions. But in 2011, the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that key provisions of the plan had not been implemented.

“Bibi says they have put a lot of effort and money into the Ethiopian community, but none of that money has reached the community and nothing is working. There are no programs to show for it and certainly no projects on the ground with clear goals for how to measure success,” said Yerday. “Everyone grumbles that Ethiopians get so much money and they’re always complaining, but in reality, no one is receiving the money and people are living in ghettos. We don’t really have real partners to change the situation and it’s really frustrating.”

A big part of the problem is implementation. A case in point is a law that reserves positions for Ethiopians to work for the city and state. While the law exists, no one is in charge of overseeing it so that the information never reaches the Ethiopian community.

“What we are doing in our daily work is calling these governmental offices and asking them what is going on with these positions. We send them letters and it takes a long time get an answer,” said Yerday. “When you have a law on the books you still need someone to be responsible for making sure it is implemented. This is part of a bigger problem in Israel where MK’s (Members of Knesset) suggest laws but no one checks to see that they are executed.”

In the case of the Ethiopian Israeli community, this bureaucratic inefficiency is a major obstacle in the face of progress.

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“We would be in a much better situation if there were 30 Ethiopians working in governmental positions,” said Yerday.

There is currently one Ethiopian Jew serving as a Member of Knesset, Shlomo Mulla. While legal and political advocacy are important components in the fight against discrimination, activists agree that just as crucial is educating and empowering the community itself.

“Often an oleh doesn’t even know their rights are being trampled on or how to proceed,” said Dessie of Tebeka. “But even if he knows he has rights, there is a language barrier. Many of the people [earmarked] to help Ethiopians only speak Hebrew and don’t understand their language or their culture. Also, to our distress, many in the Ethiopian community think the government is always right when in reality, not only what they do doesn’t always help citizens, it can even hurt them.”

What activists see as a silver lining is a new generation of Ethiopians who are coming of age in Israel, are fluent in Hebrew, serve in the IDF and are at home in Israeli society.

“The main improvement we’ve see is how the young people are taking responsibility for this situation and demanding their rights instead of waiting for government to do its work,” said Yerday. “This is the natural progress that has been occurring, but there is still a lot that needs to be done. I feel we won’t have real change until young people are going into politics and working in ngo’s and are active in their neighborhoods with their parents, brothers and sisters. Most of the work is on us as a community because as we’ve seen with our history, when you don’t act, nothing will happen.”

Israeli activists say there is an additional factor that can play an instrumental role in changing the current reality for Ethiopians in Israel: World Jewish involvement.

“It’s crucial for Jews from the United States, for example, to petition the Israeli Government and say this isn’t ok. They need to tell Bibi that racism is not ok. If they won’t get involved, things won’t improve. We can change laws but that won’t bring about lasting improvement,” said Dessie.

Yerday also cautions Jewish supporters around the world to pay attention to where their philanthropic contributions actually go.

“I’m not saying they shouldn’t continue their philanthropy, but that they need to be critical of how the money is being used,” she said. She cited as examples grants given to support Ethiopian children that never actually reach the children.

“Most of the money goes to administrative things and salaries and in the end, what the children get is almost nothing,” she said.

A big part of the problem is to create programs with very concrete objectives and ways to track and measure success.

“What we see are many projects that look good in photos, you will see a lot of smiling children who are very nice and cute, but in the end the after-school program is nothing more than a few hours of babysitting. There isn’t deep thinking that goes into creating sustainable programs,” said Yerday.