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הקונסוליה הכללית של  
ישראל בניו יורק

CONSULATE GENERAL  
OF ISRAEL IN NEW YORK

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א ל : מנהל הפוצות  
מאה : ס/קונכ"ל ניו יורק

הנדון : דיון בקונגרס בנושא הפלשים  
בהמשך למברקינו 201/45 ו-340

רצ"ב העדות שנחנו כל המשחתפים בדיון. בנוסף לדברים אלו הוקראה בדיון הצהרת  
ה-אן.ג'יי.סי.אר.איי.סי שאוחה העברנו אליכם. למרות שחייבנו פגישה בין  
אנשי ה-אן.ג'יי.סי.אר.איי.סי וחברי הקונגרס שהשתתפו בדיון, כבשלכם 993, טרם  
נקבעה פגישה מעין זו. יתכן שתחקים בחודש הבא.

בברכה,

אורי בר מ

העחק : אבנר - משרד רוה"מ  
הלוי - המוסד  
אבילאה - וושינגטון  
דומיניץ - הסוכנות

TESTIMONY OF Rachamin Yitzack  
August 4, 1982

Only 200 hundred years ago we were 500,000 people. In 1948 we were about 40,000. Today we are about 25,000 people surviving.

The Falashas\* believe that the first Jews came to Ethiopia from Egypt after they had fled from Israel with Jeremiah after the destruction of the first temple in the year 587 BCE. Others trace the origin of the Falashas from the visit of the Queen of Sheba to the court of King Solomon. According to the legend, the Queen returned to her land with a son from Solomon and a large Jewish entourage, the ancestors of the Falashas. Others maintain that the Falashes are decendants of one of the lost tribes of Dan.

Whatever the true origin of the Falashas is, there is no doubt that many left Israel after the destruction of the first temple. Until the middle of the present century, the Falashas practiced the rituals of the Jewish Bible.

The Falashas had their own independent kingdom ruled, and over a large portion of the Northwest part of Ethiopia, they had their own kings and one queen.

In the late 13th century, pressure on the Falasha population resulted from evangalistic and expansionist activities of the new dynasty, which claimed to be the rightful inheritors of the Axumite legacy. The period between 1270 and 1632 is known as a period of wars. The Falasha king, Gideon, fought against the economic oppression and for religious independence of the Falasha. One of the Ethiopian kings (King Yizhak) issued a proclamation

stating that "he who is not baptised in the Christian religion may inherit the land of the father;" otherwise let him be a Falasha (exile, stranger).

Since then all the vestiges of this Jewish community, political and economical independence, were destroyed. They were denied the right to own land, though farming was the main source of their income. This condition continued until the overthrow of King Haile Selasie in 1974.

Their conditions since 1974:

The conditions of the (Falashas) Ethiopian Jews goes from bad to worse. When the Russian-oriented government took over the power, it seemed that the Falashas would benefit from it. But, ironically, the contrary proved to be the case:

#### 1. Economically:

As soon as the present government took over, they proclaimed that they overthrew King Haile Selasie, because his government was bankrupt and he caused the death of millions of Ethiopians due to starvation. Then this new government declared a land reform: free land to the Falashas. The Falashas were pleased with this declaration. Unfortunately, this joy did not last long.

The royal families and landowners who lost their land and privileges, ran away to the western parts of the country to the area where the majority of the Falashas are located. There they established what they called an anti-revolutionary party. Their first target was the Falashas. First they came to the Falasha villages and confiscated their meager possessions; then they threw them out of their houses and off what little land they had farmed. This action uprooted the Falashas from their land before the land reform proclamation was implemented. As a result, several thousand Falashas became refugees, youngsters were kidnapped to serve in the army of the anti-revolutionary parties. The central

government could not defend the Falashas because of the war with the Somalia and Eretria.

The Falashas are located mostly in three provinces: about 85% are located in the Gondar province; the rest in are in the Tigre and Wollo provinces. There are about 500 Falasha villages in the mentioned provinces. Besides primitive agriculture, they are also involved in making pottery, weaving, blacksmithing, and embroidering. All Falasha are in lower income groups. In Ethiopia, which has one of the lowest standards of living in the 'owrld, this means a living death. The average life span is 36.

*Handwritten signature*

2. Politically:

The Falashas are accused by both the central government and the anti-government parties of not being loyal. The central government blames the Falashas, as if they were collaborating with the anti-government parties, because of their location. Likewise, the anti-government accuses them as if they were collaborating with the central government. the two provinces of Gondar and Tigre rebelled against the central government and the Falashas were caught in between the two cross-fires. Due to this, hundreds of Falashas were killed or taken prisoner. There is no other group that has been caught in this hammer and anvil position. We are dammed from both sides.

Because of this desperate situation, some Falashas started to run away from the country to the neighboring countries. Under the rule of Haile Selasie a program of general and religious education was started. A small group of teachers (Falashas) were trained in Israel and returned to Ethiopia. The government encouraged the development of an educational program. The present government general of Gondar, (a supreme ruler, as the 'central government' was weak and governors of various provinces had dictatorial powers) decided to: A) stop illegal emigration of Falashas B) Stop education of Falashas C) Stop religious practices of Falashas.

He closed down 22 elementary schools and the only high school. In addition, 4 vocational schools were shut tight. Some 78 teachers were dismissed and forbidden to work and a selected group of teachers were sent to jail and tortured. Every Falasha had to carry specially identifiable papers which also restrict his travel. The Falasha, being mostly farmers, had to sell their products in the market. Market day was changed to Saturday, and as they were Sabbath observers they could not and would not go to the market to sell their wares on the Holy day of the week. The above actions caused great distress among the Falashas. Because of the fear for our lives, every day was full of tensions and a need to seek our way out to Israel became central in our minds.

Unfortunately, what little leadership we had was in jail. At one point all Kohanim, religious priests were also in jail (because they helped organize the distribution of matzah for Passover).

The way out of Ethiopia is full of danger. This danger is not only from the authorities, but also bandits along the way. Weeks and sometimes months are spent in the desert, walking, wandering, hiding until one can find a way to cross the border. Starvation, dehydration add to the difficulties. We estimate that 8% of those who try to escape die on the way.

All of us who have escaped from this living death have left family behind. Parents, brothers, sisters, wives and children. We await the day of their arrival. The Falasha pray that one day he and all of his family will be able to go up to Jerusalem. Those of us who have made it here are now rebuilding some of our ancient customs in these modern times. We find freedom here with our people. Our prayers have been answered. We ask only to be allowed to come back home after a more than 2000 year trek.

## P R O P O S A L S

1. a. To seek diplomatic channels and other avenues for approaching the Ethiopian government, on pure humanitarian basis for family reunion in Israel.
  - b. To stop issuing the special papers for the Falashas and to eliminate the restriction of visiting rights to their families.
  - c. To let Falashas practice their religion.
  - d. To open all the Falasha schools and let all the Falasha teachers back to their teaching.
  - e. To allow visitors from abroad to visit Falasha villages.
2. Free and open immigration of all Falashans, who wish to emigrate to Israel where we are welcome.

BIOGRAPHY OF RACHAMIN YITZACK

I. Name: Nahom Ben-Yossef - (Cover name because of security)

Date of Birth: 1943

- I was born and brought up in Ethiopia in the province of Gondar in one of the Falashan villages

- I completed my secondary education in Gondar, ~~in Gondar~~ town.

II. Education: College level

III. Experience: Worked in the field of education as an instructor, as inspector and as a director in several provinces in Ethiopia.

IV. I escaped and walked about 380 Kilometers from Ethiopia to another country in Africa and lived as a refugee for several months.

-About a year ago I made Aliya to Israel.

Now I am an Israeli working for the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, to help the Falashas in Israel.