

# Constructive Criticism in Israel's Democratic Discourse

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## ABSTRACT

*Anti-Israel activists have extrapolated foreign narratives onto the Ethiopian experience to underscore Israel's alleged racism. Self-proclaimed progressive "critics" of Israel use the "race card" to reinforce a Palestinian political narrative and to foment political polarization within Israeli society.*

*Utilizing the binary black/white racism frame is convenient because of its historical pervasiveness and the accompanying emotional trigger that blinds people to political nuance.*

*Ethiopians should pursue an assertive strategy through legal and effective means to guarantee their democratic rights. The Israeli government, on its part, must provide its citizens reassurance that their rights are being protected and that their lives are being considered.*

Racial discrimination and inequality exist even in the most democratic of societies, and Israel is no different than any Western country when it comes to racism. However, labeling Israel a "racist country" is blatantly false. Israel took great risks to rescue over 120,000 Ethiopian Jews during several secret missions to Ethiopia, at great economic cost.<sup>1</sup> Israel, like other democracies,

should seek to improve social and economic policies and prevent prejudicial discrimination, yet accusing Israel of being a “racist country” is an act of demonization and delegitimization.<sup>2</sup>

Israel’s self-definition as Jewish does not make it racist, nor do its immigration or land rights policies, since many states afford citizenship and ownership exclusively to those of a particular heritage. Jewish citizenship has nothing to do with color, and presenting Israel as a “white supremacist” country is absurd. Some form of “white privilege” exists in most societies with dominant European populations, but this was never the spirit of the Jewish State, which has been falsely called a “white settler colonialist project” by its opponents.

The only colonialists in the area were the Ottomans and the British, not the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Zionists who came to Israel from Europe and Arab countries like Yemen to join the pre-existing Jewish old *yishuv* population. By any stretch of the imagination, any ethnic population returning to its indigenous homeland cannot be termed “colonialists.” Further immigration waves that added to the ethnic diversity of Israel resulted in over half of Israelis being “non-white.”

In addition, European Jews were never considered “white” by their Arab neighbors, and Arabs viewed Jewish fellow Middle Easterners simply as Jews, not “colonialists.”

Contrary to the false “racism” claim, the very *opposite* of racism was the inspiration that guided the Jewish liberation movement called Zionism, its essence stemming from the biblical principle of *kibbutz galuyot*<sup>3</sup> – the ingathering of the exiles – invoked as one of the aims of the Jewish State in Israel’s Declaration of Independence.<sup>4</sup>

*Kibbutz galuyot* imbues every area of Israeli life, and in its political form goes beyond color and ethnicity by *actively pursuing* world Jewry to make *aliya* in the spirit of the traditional teachings of the Torah, which consider living in the land to be a merit or a *mitzvah*, a divine commandment.<sup>5</sup> This *raison d'être* has brought millions of Jews to dwell in Israel, including those who most would not define as “white,” including Yemenites, Indians, and Ethiopians, making Israel *less* exclusive than most other countries. Taking on Jewish lifestyle and values via conversion, regardless of color or ethnicity, is similar to citizenship requirements in other countries.

The Zionist idea aimed to create a Jewish and democratic state that would balance traditional and specific Jewish values and classic and universal democratic Western values. As a democratic society, Israel boasts of a tolerant atmosphere that is inclusive of the LGBTQ community, non-Jewish citizens, and visitors with long-term visa status, including refugees, diplomats, and foreign workers.

No one forces Jews to come to Israel. Yet Israel feels a collective responsibility for the welfare of every Jew, including diaspora Jews in need. Over decades, Israel has undertaken an amazing feat by trying to assimilate Jews of vastly different cultures and backgrounds into one nation with the aim of reestablishing Jewish culture, life, and the Hebrew language in the Jewish homeland. It would be unrealistic to expect this project to go smoothly, so Israel must continuously and ardently work to confront and overcome challenges.

## **RACIAL INEQUALITY IN THE DEMOCRATIC CONTEXT**

Racism, discrimination, white supremacy, and privilege are global problems and not exclusive to Israel. Racism stems from a fear of the unknown, difficulty accepting differences, and a resistance to engage others and recognize their humanity. Racism is a term that has come to include other discriminatory phenomena and not just the traditionally perceived black/white framework.

In our context, Ethiopians, both in Israel and Ethiopia, are not immune to holding prejudices toward Ethiopians of other ethnicities. Currently, Ethiopia is experiencing social and economic degeneration and fragmentation due to ethnic tensions.<sup>6</sup> Three million Ethiopians have become homeless due to recent political infighting and ethnic politics. In addition, gender inequality and sexist attitudes permeate life in Ethiopia.<sup>7</sup>

In my general experience of observation, racial prejudice is experienced by those with lower socioeconomic status. Half of Ethiopians in Israel live under the poverty line.<sup>8</sup> Ethiopians have grappled with the difficulties of relocation and acculturation even after decades of living as Israeli citizens with full democratic rights, struggling with problems of low self-esteem and alienation.

Ethiopian Israelis have faced discrimination in employment, housing, and preschool acceptance.<sup>9</sup> To make matters worse, many older Ethiopians have not achieved Hebrew language proficiency, which is crucial in fully partaking in society at large, and feeling more comfortable, relaxed, approachable, and less threatened.

Differences in cultural perceptions further impede integration, widening the gap. For instance, in the West, avoiding eye contact makes you appear suspicious, whereas, in Ethiopia, looking directly into someone's eyes is considered rude. A lack of language



On the Ethiopian Sigd holiday, Ethiopian Kessim celebrate at the promenade near Armon Ha’Natziv in Jerusalem, 2009.

Photo: Mark Neyman/IGPO

proficiency also adds to shyness and a less direct approach. Such seemingly minor misunderstandings, more than usually, lead to painful cultural clashes or could, tragically, escalate to fatal consequences in scenarios involving youth and the police.

Ethiopians, like other newly arrived ethnic groups, can also be “cliquey” and are die-hard conservatives when it comes to holding on to their traditions and culture. This practice of living in more ethnically insular communities is not particular to Ethiopians; in Israel, many communities with similar foreign backgrounds including Americans, French, Russians, Georgians, and South Africans, live in enclaves. Some Israelis see this as a kind of self-imposed ghetto segregation that hinders assimilation.

## **THE LAW AND ISRAEL'S ETHIOPIAN YOUTH**

A more urgent and painful issue for Ethiopians has been differential treatment by law enforcement and police brutality, which has not been satisfactorily addressed by the government. The tragic deaths of Yehuda Biadga<sup>10</sup> and Solomon Tekah<sup>11</sup> in 2019, among other incidents related to police brutality,<sup>12</sup> illustrate this calamity. Over-policing has included common and random harassment of Ethiopians.

The prime minister has avoided commenting on these events, and the facts of these cases and others were insufficiently reviewed by the government-media interface, casting Israel as lawless and even inhumane on the world stage. Sweeping these issues under the carpet has had a boomerang effect and has contributed to the alienation of the Ethiopian population, the tarnishing of Israel's image, and even the delegitimization of Israel. The Israeli government must unequivocally address this issue and demand that the police force adopt professional and nondiscriminatory practices.

Worldwide, people have become much more sensitive and aware of police brutality. This is in part due to the prevalence of the internet and cellphone cameras which capture violent events in real-time. These clips are often circulated without the context of the circumstances that preceded the event, making it problematic to understand this phenomenon fully. The American "Black Lives Matter" movement has brought attention to racial over-policing in the United States. Some activists compared the situations in the two countries, which creates a false analogy. Extrapolating the American narrative and applying it to Israel ignores crucial historical differences, which leads to a faulty conclusion.

A common problem has been “walking backward” into history for political exploitation. The black/white narrative is that of the “white” oppressor – in the American case, white slave owners, and in the Israeli case - the Zionist founders, who exploited black or brown people. The exploited in the American case were Black slaves, and in the Israeli case, Mizrahim and Black Jews. Yet this analogy is faulty; formerly free Africans were taken as slaves to the United States hundreds of years ago and, even after their emancipation, suffered racism and segregation.

In contrast, Ethiopian Jews suffered oppressive religious prejudice in Ethiopia. They were rescued by the State of Israel, flown to the Jewish homeland to which they dreamed of returning to for centuries, and granted greater freedom, which they attained immediately upon arrival. The same can be said of Mizrahim fleeing from oppression in Muslim lands.

An underlying theme in the story of African Americans is the cruel way in which Africans were unwillingly ripped away from their home continent and lives, and taken to a strange and distant land, to be a foreign implants in the Americas. This, of course, is a valid narrative, but, in contrast, it does not parallel the feeling of familiarity and connection that both Jewish and Christian Ethiopians feel towards the Holy Land. There is a deep, spiritual, and organic historical link between Israel and Ethiopia, as brought down in Ethiopian legend and folklore.<sup>13</sup>

It is in this spirit of historical continuity that Jewish Ethiopians came to Israel, as free people, who were afforded full citizenship, like other diaspora Jews, who also, incidentally, found integration into Israeli society difficult. Needless to say, few Ethiopians would opt to return to Ethiopia.





In yet another racially-charged accusation, American anti-Israel activists like Women's March leader Linda Sarsour and Black Lives Matter activist Marc Lamont Hill have correlated American police brutality towards African Americans with the anti-terror training that American police have received from the Israel police





Ethiopian Israelis take part in a memorial service on Mount Herzl in memory of Ethiopian Jews who perished on their journey to Israel, 2014.

Photo: Kobi Gideon/IGPO

force. Sarsour and Hill do this to serve their own political agendas, using identity politics and intersectionality as the vehicles.<sup>14</sup> The potential damage this police conspiracy theory may be causing to Jews who live in black communities in the recent waves of anti-Semitic violence is hard to prove, but suffice it to say that the



Ethiopian Jews demonstrate for reunion with their relatives and for the release of prisoners in Ethiopia in front of the Prime Minister's office in Jerusalem, 2005.

Photo: Moshe Milner/IGPO

internet brings these false narratives into the intimate spaces of people's lives: their phones, their homes, and their minds.

Yet, understandably, like African Americans, the Ethiopian community has been justifiably frustrated and, at times, enraged with racial discrimination and related police brutality. As a result, some Ethiopians have been inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement in forming attitudes towards government authorities and in conducting protests.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the same way the American movement became politicized, the Ethiopian law enforcement issue has become politicized. The foreign press and Israel's detractors have exploited these tragic events as an anti-Israel "free-for-all."

Ethiopians must vehemently reject this misappropriated, sensationalism, and instead, we must concentrate our efforts on targeted legal and political action to *actually* improve our quality of life and not cynically serve other people's interests.

The Ethiopian community should express its own narrative and take care to employ the right medium in attaining long-term goals and informing initiatives. We live in a relatively small country and should demand politicians' personal involvement in checking cases of discrimination and effectively working to remedy these situations. In order to see this happen, there must be a collective awakening in Israeli society – both by Ethiopians themselves and by other Israelis – that will allow us to see how our narrative is being twisted and used against our own best interests.

## **CHANGING THE ETHIOPIAN NARRATIVE**

In daily life, racism is often the “elephant in the room.” My personal strategy against racism is rooted in my sense of pride: I refuse to publically acknowledge discrimination and choose to disregard and willfully ignore negative comments and attitudes. Giving credence to prejudices by emotionally engaging with them only serves to empower them. Our resilience can serve to immunize us from needing others to recognize our humanity. Only we, as individuals, can bridge gaps, and we should not expect politicians to do this for us. We must reject the poison of racism by reasserting our identity, and by earning and reinstating our self-worth. Pride means not partaking in self-victimization and not seeking the validation of white people.

In recent years, many immigrant groups in Israel have gone through a similar process. In the past, Ashkenazi immigrants struggled to blend into a Middle Eastern cultural reality in the old *yishuv*; later, during wartimes, Mizrahim were shamed for listening to Arabic music and speaking Arabic, the language of “the enemy.”

Yet today, there is a cultural renaissance in Israel. Israelis have begun to feel confident in both their Israeli nationality and in their historical diaspora ethnic identities, with less inner conflict. This is often expressed through art and culture: people are learning Yiddish and singing in Judeo-Arabic, and are often enchanted and fascinated by cultures unrelated to their own. That unusual and original mix is the essence of the Jewish State - a shared set of Jewish values, together with the cultural gifts that are the actualization of *kibbutz galuyot*.

Ethiopian-Israelis must realize their place in this mix and actualize their potential in contributions to Israeli society, in order to take their rightful place within it. From my personal integration experience, I have learned that native Israelis, who are known for being assertive and candid, appreciate and applaud this course of action.

## **HEALTHY CIVIL DISCOURSE AIMS FOR PRACTICAL IMPROVEMENTS FOR THE COMMUNITY**

Ethiopian-Israelis must organize and formulate a plan for the advancement of the community that addresses past problems and pitfalls. Bureaucratic missteps have stalled progress. The Israeli government has budgeted programs and projects for the Ethiopian community.<sup>16</sup> However, money earmarked for these endeavors - sports, art and culture, and research centers - has been returned to the government treasury due to bureaucratic and decision-making

obstacles.<sup>17</sup> Planning and budgets must be followed and monitored for efficiency and changed appropriately according to community needs.

Israel also needs to place greater confidence in its Ethiopian community through sound social marketing strategies that would remind the community of its rights and make it feel protected. By doing so, not only would it perpetuate and reinforce the stand of the government, but it would also sensitize those who would exploit uninformed, naïve citizens. Creating awareness of and protecting citizens' legal rights are cornerstones of any democracy.

The police issue must be resolved: the government must step up and acknowledge the problem and stop it, as recommended in the government's 2016 Palmor Report.<sup>18</sup>

We also must maintain perspective: there's room for improvement, but things are not that bad. Recent statistics have shown a reduction in arrests in the Ethiopian community<sup>19</sup> and an upswing in higher education achievements and military advancement<sup>20</sup>

Israel has come far for a “young” 70-year-old country. It is nothing less than a phenomenon, even in the area of social rights, while there is still room for improvement. With all of the difficulties, Israel's character as a free democracy enables and protects us as we conduct an open dialogue. As a healthy democracy, Israel is the only self-critical country in the Middle East. It is not a dictatorship that shuts down dissent. Ethiopian-Israelis need their democratic reassurance that their rights and lives are being protected.

*The important goal of fostering a sense of unity between Ethiopians and all fellow Israelis is not a political issue; it is an issue of social cohesion and moral clarity.* Whether we succeed today, tomorrow, or in ten years, we, like other Western democracies, must take the necessary steps to ensure legally guaranteed democratic freedoms and a fairer, more just, and equitable society.



## Endnotes

- 1 <http://archive.jewishagency.org/aliyah/program/301>
- 2 <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/working-definition-antisemitism>
- 3 Deuteronomy 30:1-5.
- 4 <https://mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/declaration%20of%20establishment%20of%20state%20of%20israel.aspx>
- 5 <https://www.thelakewoodscoop.com/news/2013/11/the-mitzvah-of-yishuv-eretz-yisroel-by-rabbi-binyomin-radner.html>
- 6 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-50480087>
- 7 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-46110608>
- 8 <https://www.iaej.co.il/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/%D7%93%D7%A3-%D7%9E%D7%99%D7%93%D7%A2-%D7%A1%D7%98%D7%95%D7%93%D7%A0%D7%98%D7%99%D7%9D-%D7%9E%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%A6%D7%90-%D7%90%D7%AA%D7%99%D7%95%D7%A4%D7%99-2018-2.pdf>
- 9 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/uproar-after-kindergarten-allegedly-segregates-ethiopian-children/>
- 10 <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-israeli-police-who-shot-24-year-old-told-he-was-mentally-unstable-official-says-1.6854545>  
<https://www.timesofisrael.com/policeman-cleared-in-shooting-of-ethiopian-israeli-who-rushed-him-with-knife/>
- 11 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/cop-who-killed-ethiopian-israeli-teen-faces-softened-indictment/>
- 12 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/ethiopian-soldier-beaten-by-cop-now-a-decorated-idf-cyber-officer/>
- 13 In Ethiopian tradition, the progenitor of the Ethiopian kings was a descendent of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, known as Makeda. Ethiopia had connections to the Holy Land through its church, one of the oldest in history, which owns land in Jerusalem. Emperor Haile Selassie visited the Holy Land, including Jerusalem, in 1935, immediately after his exile following the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. Ethiopia has received military aid from Israel and still retains warm relations with the Israeli government and the Jewish people.

In Jewish tradition, the midrash tells of Moses being a king in Cush – ancient Ethiopia. The first verse of the Scroll of Esther states that the Persian empire of the time stretched from “India (Hodu) to Ethiopia (Cush).” The biblical commentators remark that this was the span of the Jewish world at the time, hinting a Jewish presence in ancient Ethiopia. See <https://ohr.edu/7253>

- 14 <https://www.jpost.com/Magazine/Black-Lives-Matter-vs-Israel-468994>  
<https://www.algemeiner.com/2018/09/26/linda-sarsours-blood-libel/>  
<https://mosaicmagazine.com/picks/israel-zionism/2019/07/the-anti-semitic-propaganda-blaming-jews-for-police-brutality-in-the-u-s/>
- 15 <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-is-israel-having-its-black-lives-matter-moment-1.7449368>
- 16 [https://www.kolzhut.org.il/he/%D7%99%D7%95%D7%A6%D7%90%D7%99\\_%D7%90%D7%AA%D7%99%D7%95%D7%A4%D7%99%D7%94](https://www.kolzhut.org.il/he/%D7%99%D7%95%D7%A6%D7%90%D7%99_%D7%90%D7%AA%D7%99%D7%95%D7%A4%D7%99%D7%94)
- 17 <https://www.iaej.co.il/%d7%90%d7%a9%d7%9c%d7%99%d7%94-%d7%a9%d7%9c-%d7%a0%d7%aa%d7%99%d7%a0%d7%94/%d7%9e%d7%99%d7%93%d7%a2-%d7%a0%d7%aa%d7%95%d7%a0%d7%99%d7%9d-%d7%95%d7%9e%d7%97%d7%a7%d7%a8%d7%99%d7%9d/%d7%aa%d7%a8%d7%91%d7%95%d7%aa-%d7%95%d7%9e%d7%95%d7%a8%d7%a9%d7%aa/29279/17/12/2018/20/sigal/>
- 18 <https://www.justice.gov.il/Pubilcations/Articles/Pages/PalmorRacismEradicationReport2016.aspx>
- 19 <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Over-policing-of-Ethiopian-Israeli-community-down-suspicion-of-racism-persists-594320>
- 20 [https://brookdale.jdc.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/MJBFacts\\_and\\_Figures\\_Ethiopian\\_Population\\_in\\_Israel-2018\\_Eng.pdf](https://brookdale.jdc.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/MJBFacts_and_Figures_Ethiopian_Population_in_Israel-2018_Eng.pdf)





Demonstrators protesting opposite the Israeli Embassy in London on May 11, 2018, mark 70 years since the “Nakba” of 1948, and in solidarity with Hamas’ “Great Return March” protests in Gaza.

Photo: David Cliff/NurPhoto