

Why the Media Ignores the Ethiopian Israeli Community's Struggle

By Elad Uzan *

Why is it that the Israeli media, which hastened to defend the dignity of a Nigerian cleaning woman and described in great detail an Eritrean mother's longing for her child, refrains from publishing passionate and moving editorials on plight of the plight of the Ethiopian Israeli community? Why is it that when it comes to displaying similar solidarity for tens of thousands of loyal Israeli citizens, their voices suddenly turn silent?

Perhaps the answer to this question lies in the slogan chanted by the crowd at last week's demonstration: "**I stand here to remind those who have forgotten: Ashkenazi Jew, Sephardic Jew, Ethiopian Jew – we are all brothers!**" ; Could it be that the central message of the Ethiopian community - national pride and strong Jewish values - have caused the media to avoid the issue?

To explain this phenomenon one must put it in historical context: Ethiopian Jewish immigration was driven primarily by passionate Zionism. There is concrete evidence of Ethiopian Jewish attempts to make Aliya (on foot) to Jerusalem in 1860, well before Herzl's political Zionism and decades before the First Zionist Congress. Call it black Zionism.

Much time has passed since the days of these pioneers: Ethiopian Jews who immigrated to Israel in recent decades have been victims to many instances of discrimination and racism, mostly by institutional players, as reflected in the data analysis published by the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption in 2005. Other forms of racism, those who have reached the broad media, were mainly as part of neighbors and work relationships.

Ethiopian Israelis demand justice. They demand equality. They demand that the color of their skin be not an impediment in the workplace or academia. They demand to be judged by their actions and achievements. They do not want housing prices to drop when they move into a neighborhood.

The Ethiopian Israeli community protests out of a genuine demand for Jewish solidarity, as sons and daughters of the Jewish nation, in the nation-state of the Jewish

people. Their demands are not motivated only by the international and universal values that are the focus of the Israeli media. Their demands are based on the virtue of national, Jewish values, which the Israeli media often snubs. Echoes to this worldview could be heard in articles published in the papers about the initiatives of Education Minister Gideon Saar that Israeli children learn about Zionism's struggles for political independence through the adoption of Israel's fallen soldiers stories. A similar picture emerges from examination of editorials expressing strong opposition to another initiative of Saar to include a visit to the Cave of Machpelah and the Old City of Jerusalem, so as part of field trips for primary schools students.

Ethiopian Israelis want integration based on shared values: Judaism, military service and higher education, through which they can express their individual contributions to the Jewish state. This fealty to Jewish values has led them to be perceived as the "enemy" by those who claim to be proponents of the Universalist view, which is particularly wary of national values and which holds a strong hold on the media.

This doesn't mean that the Israeli media sees the Ethiopian community as an "enemy", literally, but given the fact that the base demand of equality is routed in national-Jewish values, the Israeli media, which in most cases careful in adopting a national – Jewish philosophy, simply does not see the Ethiopian community as an ally in promoting the universal perspective.

Another factor which prevents the media from embracing the Ethiopian-Israeli cause is the fact that it has been, at least ostensibly - apolitical. To the contrary, press (in general) ceased to see itself as only the "**watchdog of democracy**", and considers itself a political actor for all intents and purposes. The key part that the media plays in Israeli democracy, one that seeks to bring events of the day the watchful eye of the public, exposing government corruption and irregularities, and as the able interpreter of all these are no longer in the center of the media's agenda. Media nowadays is interested in shaping the public agenda, as appears from recent editorials published in major newspaper. The Ethiopian Israeli community's struggle for essential civil equality does not seek to eliminate or replace the current coalition government, nor is it tied to any one political view. Therefore, unlike last summer's social protest during which the current government was denounced, the media simply sees no reason to give stage to the Ethiopian Israeli struggle.

Erasmus of Rotterdam, besides being a precursor humanistic education, was the one who claimed that human beings become humane through a process of humanization that includes education and socialization. Recent history teaches us that education may also lead to dehumanization of man ; education for the ennoblement of a certain race over another, Nazism or Bolshevism, also took people from their humanity.

He who sees himself, like this writer, both belonging to the humanistic Judaism, and believe that the contradictions between the moral humanism and the values of Zionism (i.e., Jewish National Movement) must be resolved, Would agree that the existence of a healthy, moral Israeli society contingent implementation of ethical, universal rules -both from the Ministry of Hillel the Elder and Immanuel Kant: That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah; Always recognize that human individuals are ends, and do not use them as mere means to your end; There is no moral rule which is not universally valid.

Let us hope that at least some the insights expressed here will soak into the consciousness of the Israeli media.

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