

STRENGTHENING ETHIOPIAN IMMIGRANTS TO ISRAEL: AN IN-HOME FAMILY INTERVENTION

Itzhak Lander, Ph.D, Sapir College, Hof Ashkelon, Israel

This narrative recounts the author's experiences applying a family intervention with new Ethiopian immigrants to Israel at high risk for child maltreatment and domestic violence, and presents narratives of empowering social work practice with two families. Initially, the reader is provided with a brief introduction to the large contribution of immigration to the development of the state of Israel, as well as the nature of Israeli immigrant resettlement. The author presents the historical origins and characteristics of Jews of Ethiopia, as well as an account of their distinct waves of immigration to Israel during the past four decades. The many obstacles faced by the Ethiopian Jewish community within Israeli society, as well as some of their achievements, are noted.

"Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.'" (Genesis 12:1)

The central purpose of this narrative is to recount the author's experience applying a family systems intervention with recent Ethiopian immigrants to Israel at high risk for child maltreatment and domestic violence. Two narratives of empowering social work practice with hard-to-engage families within their homes and cultural and linguistic context, highlight fundamental dilemmas related to assisting immigrant and refugee communities in Israel and without.

Another aim of this paper is to place the story of the Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel—its history, immigration, way of life and struggles—firmly into the social work literature, as well as to help this narrative find a larger place within the dominant Israeli account of its immigrants and their resettlement.

Ethiopian Jewish immigration and resettlement in Israel: Background, scope and national context Israel is a migratory nation fortified with a constant influx of immigrants from Jewish communities scattered throughout the world. This migratory character exemplifies an essential theme in the Israeli national ethos: the reunification of the Jewish people. This has been accomplished both by

proactive endeavours to attract voluntary Jewish immigration, as well as efforts to actively relocate endangered Jewish communities to Israel (Roer-Strier, Strier, Este, Shimoni, & Clark, 2005). The ingathering of the Jewish people to Israel has been facilitated by the Law of Return (1950), conferring upon Jews the right to immigrate to Israel, and the Law of Nationality (1952), granting automatic Israeli citizenship to all Jewish immigrants upon their arrival. Immigrant resettlement has essentially been the responsibility of the Ministry of Immigration and Absorption, typically having received newcomers into large absorption centers where they could initially reside and learn the Hebrew language (Bourhis & Dayan, 2004).

Upon its establishment in 1948, the population of the state of Israel stood at 873,000. After a seven-fold increase in less than 50 years, in 2003 the population was approximately 6.5 million, with Jews comprising 80% of the citizenry. Israel's Jewish majority is comprised of two main ethnic clusters: orientals (sephardim) and ashkenazim. Members of the first group, or their ancestors, immigrated to Israel from the Near East, North Africa, Yemen, Ethiopia, the Balkans, Iran, Iraq, India, and the Moslem republics of the Former Soviet Union. The second group originated in the Americas and Europe. In 2003, 34% of the Jewish population of Israel either originated in Asia-Africa or

were born to parents born in Asia-Africa; 40% either originated in the Americas-Europe or were born to parents born in the Americas-Europe; and 26% were born in Israel to Israeli-born parents (Lavee & Katz, 2003). Indeed, nearly 40% of the country's Jewish population were born abroad.

In its first 57 years of independence Israel had absorbed more than 50% of its population through immigration. Immigration to Israel was built on a number of large waves, or distinct migratory movements originating in specific demographic regions, representing more than 70 countries from around the world. The two contemporary waves of immigration originated in the Former Soviet Union and Ethiopia (Ben David & Ben Ari, 1997; Lavee & Katz, 2003; Roer-Strier, Strier, Este, Shimoni, & Clark, 2005; Weil, 1995).

The immigration to Israel of the Ethiopian Jewish community, known as "Beta Israel," the name given them by Emperor Yshaq I in 1270 A.D, essentially marked the end of a largely autonomous six hundred year old Jewish presence in Northern Ethiopia. Since its beginnings, Beta Israel had held sacred Rabbinical biblical canon, as well as the books of Enoch, Jubilees, Baruch, and the Books of Ezra. A book entitled *Te-ezaa Sanbat* or, the Precepts of the Sabbath, was considered especially important. Beta Israel liturgical works included weekday services, Sabbath and festival prayers and various blessings. Social contact between the Beta Israel and other Ethiopians was always limited. Ethiopian Jews were forbidden to eat the food of non-Jews. Unlike their fellow countrymen, the Beta Israel shunned the very popular raw meat dishes such as *kitfo* and *gored gored*. Though originally speaking Cushitic languages, Ethiopian Jewry eventually adopted Amharic and Tigrinya, both semitic languages (Avner, 1988).

The precise origins of the Beta Israel remain controversial. Some scholars posit that they immigrated along with other Israelites to Egypt after the destruction of the first temple, where they remained until forced to flee when Julius Caesar defeated Cleopatra in 35 BCE. While many wandered to South Arabia and Yemen, still others fled to Sudan and continued

on to Ethiopia, entering through Auara, adjacent to the Sudanese border, or via Eritrea. Alternatively, many Beta Israel believe they are the direct descendants of the Israelite tribe of Dan who, after fleeing civil war in the kingdom of Israel, settled initially in Egypt and from there moved southward up the Nile river to Ethiopia. Still other Beta Israel assert that their Danite origins go back to the days of Moses himself, that immediately after the exodus a group of Danites parted from their fellow Israelites and moved southward, ultimately settling in Ethiopia (Kessler, 1996).

This narrative recounts the author's experiences applying a family intervention with new Ethiopian immigrants to Israel at high risk for child maltreatment and domestic violence, and presents narratives of empowering social work practice with two families. Initially, the reader is provided with a brief introduction to the large contribution of immigration to the development of the state of Israel, as well as the nature of Israeli immigrant resettlement. The author presents the historical origins and characteristics of Jews of Ethiopia, as well as an account of their distinct waves of immigration to Israel during the past four decades. The many obstacles faced by the Ethiopian Jewish community within Israeli society, as well as some of their achievements, are noted. The precise origin of Beta Israel notwithstanding, this community managed to live for hundreds of years, in relative geographic and social seclusion, in Northern Ethiopia. For much of this period they ruled their own wholly autonomous Jewish kingdom, with its capital city Gondor.

Their relocation from central Ethiopia, to the more defensible regions of the north was necessitated by Beta Israel's armed struggle against their forced conversion to Christianity by the Ethiopian dynasty, which had declared Christianity its official religion.

The following centuries oscillated between prosperity and modest territorial expansion for Beta Israel and their Jewish kingdom, and war and defeat at the hands of empire forces. The golden age of the Beta Israel kingdom, under Queen Judith, lasted from approximately 858-1270 CE. It was during this time that world Jewry first heard from world explorers,

accounts of this remote Jewish community. By 1414 CE however, Emperor Yshaq had totally conquered and annexed the Jewish kingdom, forcing the Jews to either convert to Christianity or surrender their land. His decree is said to be related to the origin of the name sometimes given Beta Israel, "falashas," which means "wanderers" or "landless persons." In 1627 a particularly cruel Emperor Susenyos sold many of the Beta Israel into slavery, burned their religious books and forbade the practice of any form of Judaism. Nonetheless Beta Israel still numbered approximately one million, and managed to reach relative economic prosperity, as the Jews agreed to work as builders and carpenters for the empire, occupations that Christian Ethiopians shunned (Avner, 1988; Kessler, 1996).

The contemporary history of Beta Israel is purported to begin with the reunification of Ethiopia in the mid-19th century. Under the reign of Theodore II, English missionaries succeeded in converting many members of the community to Christianity. Those who converted, as well as their descendents, eventually became known as the Falash Mura. The missionary efforts however, did stimulate European Jewish interest in the Beta Israel. This culminated in widespread European rabbinical recognition of their Jewishness, as well as generous philanthropic contributions toward their Hebrew education. In 1921, the chief rabbi of the British mandate for Palestine, Abraham Isaac Cook, similarly acknowledged the Beta Israel as Jews. Tragically however, the majority of the Beta Israel population had succumbed to the brutal famine, and related typhus and smallpox epidemics, that broke out across Ethiopia in 1888 (Naim, 2003).

By 1936 the armed forces of Italy invaded and occupied Ethiopia and the racial laws enacted in Italy began to be applied in Italian East Africa. In 1940 Italian forces publicly executed senior Beta Israel leaders. In 1941 the fascist Italian regime sent an order to Ethiopia to annihilate Beta Israel, similar to the Holocaust in Europe. However, the early liberation of Ethiopia by Allied forces prevented its implementation (Naim, 2003).

With the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 many Ethiopian Jews began to

contemplate immigration to Israel. However, Emperor Haile Selassie refused to grant the Beta Israel permission to leave his empire (Ashkenazi & Weingrod, 1987; Naim, 2003). Despite the prohibition, from 1965 until 1975, small numbers of Ethiopian Jews did succeed in immigrating to Israel, initially entering the country for work or study purposes and staying on illegally. Due to substantial popular support, these individuals succeeded in receiving regularization from the Israeli authorities and, after undergoing symbolic conversions, brought their families to join them. Their status in the country was further bolstered by the 1973 public recognition of the Jewishness of Beta Israel by both the chief Sephardic and Ashkenazic rabbis: Ovadia Yosef and Shlomo Goren. Two years later the Beta Israel would be recognized as Jews, for the purposes of the Law of Return and immigration to Israel, by the government of Yitzhak Rabin (Ashkenazi & Weingrod, 1987).

From 1977-1984 thousands of Beta Israel escaped Ethiopia by foot, making their way to Sudan. Upon arrival they were housed in makeshift U.N. refugee camps. During the 70's and 80's life in Ethiopia had become untenable. The country experienced armed revolt, civil war and a series of famines that left tens of thousands dead. What is more, the situation of Ethiopian Jewry was exacerbated by the open hostility demonstrated toward them by the pro-communist military dictator Mengistu. This animosity notwithstanding, Mengistu initially closed his eyes to the illegal emigration of Ethiopian Jewry after the Israeli government agreed to supply arms to his revolutionary government, at that time at war with Somalia (Ashkenazi & Weingrod, 1987).

Growing Israeli concern for the fate of Beta Israel led to its first large scale rescue operation of Ethiopian Jews in 1984 – Operation Moses. Over a period two months Israeli secret service forces airlifted 7000 Jews who had resided in refugee camps in Sudan to Israel, the Sudanese permitting this undertaking due to strong American diplomatic pressure. Only a short while later, in Operation Sheba, another 5000 Ethiopian Jews were similarly brought to Israel. However, the largest rescue of Ethiopian Jews by Israeli

special forces occurred in 1991, effectively resolving the immigration of Beta Israel. Known as Operation Shlomo, and lasting no more than 36 hours, 14,000 Ethiopian Jews were airlifted, in El Al (Israeli national airline) planes that had their seats removed in order to achieve maximum passenger capacity (Pozkanzer, 2000).

Sadly, during the course of the various waves of Beta Israel emigration, more than 4000 men, women and children lost their lives to famine, sickness and armed robbers, either on the treacherous roads they travelled or in the grossly overcrowded refugee camps in which they found temporary shelter (Odenheimer & Rosen, 2006).

The past 20 years has witnessed the slow irregular immigration to Israel of the Falash Mura, who publicly declared themselves Jewish and as a consequence, in possession of the right to live in Israel. Their claims were subject to much political controversy as Israeli authorities refused to consider them Jewish and therefore eligible for Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return. This notwithstanding, many have been allowed to come to Israel on humanitarian grounds, while still others participated in formal conversion processes organized by Israeli rabbis so that they might be allowed to immigrate under the Law of Return (Odenheimer & Rosen, 2006). In November 2010, the Israeli cabinet approved a plan to allow 8000 Falash Mura to immigrate to Israel (Eglash, 2011).

Currently, the Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel numbers approximately 120,000, with the majority, about 70%, born in Ethiopia. Over time most have moved out of the large government run absorption centres, where they may have stayed initially for a period of several years, into their own apartments, dispersed in towns and cities throughout the country. The purchase of these modest apartments was made possible by the support of Israeli government authorities who granted the new Ethiopian Jewish newcomers both generous and long term loans as well as direct grants (Hertzogm, 1999; Yilma, 1996).

Similar to other groups of Jews who have "made aliyah," (immigrated to Israel), the Ethiopian Jews have faced serious obstacles

in their integration into society. Perhaps most of their difficulty can be attributed to a relative lack of cultural codes as well as vocational and academic preparation needed to cope successfully in an industrialized nation such as Israel. The encounter of the Beta Israel with an urbanized and technologically advanced Israeli society has often been nothing less than shocking for the newcomers. Important here has been the grave difficulty of the patriarchal Ethiopian family structure to make the necessary transformations to insure the optimal growth and development of its members in the new milieu. Other significant barriers to Beta Israel integration have included their relatively limited Hebrew language skills and ability to communicate, as well as manifestations of discrimination and racism in particular sectors related to their Black African ancestry.

Hence, the Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel has experienced a relatively acute sense of exclusion and distress which has at times been worsened by the paternalistic approach of the Ministry of Immigration and Absorption towards this community. Within this context they have experienced high levels of family discord, domestic violence, and child maltreatment, as well as alcohol abuse.

The difficulties of the Ethiopian community in Israel notwithstanding, they have made important progress in integrating into mainstream Israeli society. This has been partially attributed to the fact that many young Ethiopians have excelled in their mandatory military service and, as a result, have been able to increase their chances for better employment and educational opportunities (Ben David & Ben Ari, 1997; Bourhis & Dayan, 2004; Ringel, Ronell, & Getahun, 2005; Ponizofsky; Ginath, Durst, & Wondemeneh, 1998; Roer Strier, Strier, Este, Shimoni & Clark, 2005; Schwarz, 2001; Weil, 1995)

A number of Ethiopian Jews have become especially well known for their achievements across Israeli society. They include soccer players such Baruch Dago and Ziv Cabeda, marathon runners Steng Ayele and Assaf Bimro, singers Cabra Kasai and Ayala Indegashat who performed the national anthem

at the opening ceremonies of the 2009 Macabiah Games, internationally renowned model Esti Marno, and ex-member of parliament Mazor Behaiyna.

A Narrative of Social Work Practice with Ethiopian Israelis: A Family-Based Intervention for Child Maltreatment

Piny, age 11, resided with her father Moguba, age 40, and her step mother, Adamnesh, age 29, (names of all family members are pseudonyms). They had immigrated to Israel 6 months earlier from the vicinity of the city of Gondor, in Northern Ethiopia. Since their arrival the family resided in a large government immigrant absorption center along with hundreds of their fellow Ethiopians. Moguba and Adamnesh studied Hebrew five days a week for 6 hours each day, within the center, while Piny, along with the rest of the children in the center, attended an elementary school in the community.

Piny and her parents were referred to me for treatment after the municipal social worker had received a telephone call from the girl's school expressing concern about her wellbeing. Her teacher had reported that Piny was demonstrating relatively serious acting out behavior in the classroom. In addition, she had come to class with bruising on her forearms, albeit minor, that she could not satisfactorily explain. I arranged to meet Piny, Moguba and Adamnesh in their apartment located in the government run immigrant absorption centre. As the parents reportedly spoke only the most basic Hebrew, I requested an Amharic-Hebrew translator to work with us.

I approached the absorption centre on foot. It was a high rise apartment building. I wondered about the hundreds of people who lived behind row upon row of tiny square windows. Were they happy? What did they eat today? What did they talk about to each other? A large number of men, women, and children lounged around on the outside front steps; half of them dressed in Western garb, the others wrapped in white traditional clothing. Beside them, and very noticeable by virtue of his rosy white complexion, stood a young pistol carrying guard, just like one finds at the entrance of every public building in Israel. As

I came closer and started climbing the steps I felt a bit awkward, as if everyone was staring at me. I am so white! I pondered about whether they felt uncomfortable about their skin color when they left the protective auspices of the absorption centre. I concluded that they probably experienced, several times every day, what I was now feeling.

After I signed in with the guard, a common security practice in Israeli public buildings, I entered a relatively small and cramped lobby. How could such a tall building which obviously was home to hundreds, have a lobby the size of my living room?

Immediately I was overwhelmed by the strong odors of food I was unfamiliar with. After just a minute or two a cute boy, of elementary school age, came up to me and said, "Hi ferangee." In Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia, the word "ferangee" means foreigner. I had heard that for some this word had derogatory connotations. However, I felt that the boy was just being friendly. I smiled at him and said "shalom." He looked embarrassed and quickly disappeared.

In a short while a formally dressed man approached me, and introduced himself as my interpreter. We headed off together for the elevator that would take us to the 7th floor where the family lived. I could not help but think how strange it must have seemed for the newcomers to ride an elevator for the first time in their lives; the very elevator where I was now standing. Were some of them afraid? Did any of them refuse to enter? What if one of the older people could not get used to the elevator and had to climb many flights of stairs to get home?

I remembered at that moment the very difficult time I myself had adjusting to Israel 20 years ago when I arrived from Canada. What tremendous and overwhelming adjustment difficulties were these people going through? How could they not be traumatized by their shocking encounter with Israeli society where high-tech- is the new divinity of the 21st century? I sensed that I was becoming aware of a fundamental dilemma relevant beyond the borders of Israel and the experience of 100,000 Ethiopian Jews. I could

not help but ask myself whether we should have not interfered in these peoples' lives and just let them remain in their mud houses in their own villages in rural Ethiopia and live out their lives. At this moment it did not seem humane to have uprooted them from all they had known and to place them for an indefinite period of time in a new high rise apartment building on a busy residential street.

As we climbed higher and higher the odor of the food became even stronger and I asked myself whether it was permissible to let myself be disgusted by it? Somehow that feeling did not seem professionally appropriate. I was a bit ashamed of myself for this temporary crack in my usually strong sense of professional propriety. I was saved by the bell, finding myself and the translator standing right in front of the door of the family's apartment. I knocked and after a minute or two a man opened the door just wide enough to identify us. My interpreter, Adenele, spoke a few words in Amharic to the man after which he motioned us to come in. I thought to myself that it is uncomfortable not being able to understand what others are talking about. This triggered memories of my own first years as an immigrant in Israel when I often felt like a small child, unable to understand what was happening around me and feeling helpless and frustrated. This was a strange and unpleasant way to feel, because in my native Canada I was used to being an independent person, competent to function autonomously in my environment.

Once we entered the family home I saw before me a small studio apartment furnished with the bare essentials. My eye caught something unfamiliar. Over the stovetop lay a large metal disk, and on top of that, a round flatbread. It is called anjara, and its odour is foreign to me and difficult for me to smell. Mother, father and daughter were dressed in western clothing, which appeared new and likely purchased in Israel. We sat down on a heavily used sofa and I began to speak to Moguba, through the interpreter. Adamesh and Piny sat silently.

I started by introducing myself. They had difficulty comprehending exactly what a social worker is. That was acceptable to me as I

believed I could explain to them better as they saw how our work unfolded. They did seem to understand however, that I was sent by a government representative, and also that I wanted to help them. I made a decision not to speak at this time about the details of the school's concerns about Piny and instead decided to listen to the father, and thus allow the family to define the initial scope of our work together.

Moguba quickly started to complain about his daughter. He described at length how Piny had been misbehaving at school: speaking out of turn in class, frequently leaving her seat without permission, not doing her studies when asked to by the teacher, and also, scratching and hitting her classmates. Moguba emphasized how this behaviour was new, now that they were in Israel, and how Piny was a good and well-behaved student in Ethiopia. He claimed that since their arrival "bad spirits" had entered his daughter and influenced her behavior.

I quickly sensed that I had stumbled upon another basic dilemma related to immigration and resettlement. I had to ask myself if I should be directly challenging father's conception of the supernatural nature of the origin of Piny's difficulties? Would such a confrontation of his long-standing narrative be useful, and if so, to which family member? Perhaps the family could come to adopt an expanded narrative of the causality of the daughter's problems, where traditional and modern accounts might co-exist? And maybe the family could come up with such a revised narrative mostly on its own, as the therapeutic process progressed?

I asked father if he would permit me to meet Piny each week for an hour, in the absorption center's administrative office. I would come up to the apartment to collect her and return her home immediately when we were done. I saw that Piny's level of Hebrew was high enough that I could manage, most of the time, working with her alone, without a translator. I proposed that after I met with their daughter six times we would meet together once again so that I could share with them my impressions of their daughter and her difficulties, but also her strengths. Father smiled widely and agreed. I was not totally

sure that he completely knew to what he was agreeing but I told myself that the girl will surely benefit from our meetings. I was hopeful that next week when I knock on their door he will permit Piny to accompany me downstairs for our session. After a quick shaking of the hands, as is done in Ethiopia (the translator demonstrated for me) we both left the apartment, took the elevator to the lobby and left the absorption center. I was relieved to be on my own to think about all that had just happened.

Next week I made my way to Piny's apartment by way of the same entrance stairs, lobby and elevator and the various feelings and thoughts from last time reappear with similar intensity. I am surprised about that but it seems it will take a while to get used to the immigrant absorption centre. When I immigrated to Israel I did not live in such a center – immigrants to Israel from the Americas and Europe have a choice as to whether to live in such a place upon their arrival. The Ethiopians did not have any choice. I knocked on the family's door and father readily sent his daughter to me. She took my hand, we went downstairs and sat together in a small office. We sat down together on the floor and I gave her paper and crayons.

Without any hesitation she started to draw, as if she was somehow waiting for this opportunity. She drew almost precisely the same picture, over and over again, several times during this initial meeting and again and again, in every one of our next three sessions. Covering the entire bottom tenth of the page was a strip of brown, signifying earth and on top of it many green trees with hundreds of meticulously drawn green leaves. In the top corner was an atypically large sun with very long rays. In the sun there was an Ethiopian flag. Among the trees was a small brown hut. Beside the hut was the figure of a woman making bread, the same anjara bread I saw in Piny's home. When I asked Piny to explain what she had drawn she used her basic Hebrew: sun (shemesh), home (bayit), trees (etzim), and eema (mother). She had no word for flag, so I taught her "degel." As we drew, and played card games, and ate cookies together our relationship strengthened.

I invited the translator to join us for the fifth meeting so that I might hear Piny's full description of her strikingly identical drawings. At first barely able to stop sobbing and speak, she eventually told of how much she missed her mother as well as her maternal grandmother, uncles, aunts and cousins whom she left behind:

"Everyone here thinks Adamnesh is my mother but she isn't really. One day my father went to the city and came back divorced from my mother. She didn't even know that he was going to do that. Later that day he took me to another house in the village. Adamnesh was there. I never saw her before that. They went to sleep together and I cried myself to sleep in the corner. He told me I would not see my mother anymore, that from now on I had a new mother."

Piny went on to speak at length about her conflictual relationship with her step mother and disclosed how Adamnesh hits her when Piny does not listen to her or misbehaves. Of most concern to Piny was her uncertainty about whether she would ever speak to or see her mother again in her life. Piny was not totally sure her mother even knew she was in Israel.

"I need my mother a lot. I am sad all the time. I can't get her out of my heart. My father won't even let me mention her name. For him she is dead."

Equipped with this much more authentic and comprehensive understanding of Piny's thoughts and feelings, I called a family meeting, which I conducted along with the translator so that the family would be able to freely express themselves. The primary purpose of this pivotal session was to make a central place within the family's narrative for the daughter's thoughts and especially her feelings related to her separation and loss of her mother, her extended family on mother's side,

and her homeland, in all its majestic physical beauty.

Most important and empowering here, indeed a turning point in our therapeutic process, was when I taught the family about emotions, and we took the next several meetings to do what was essentially psycho-educational family therapy. We systematically reviewed, in understandable terms, basic information on loss, separation, and mourning, as well as emotions, both primary and secondary; including longing, fear, sadness, disappointment, guilt, and worry. We learned about what happens to a person's physical health when he keeps his thoughts and feelings inside and does not share them with anyone.

I sensed that I had stumbled upon yet another fundamental dilemma in work with immigrants and refugees. I felt compelled to ask myself whether I should be introducing this family to notions that would have revolutionary effects on each of them and their relations – the notion of feelings, loss and separation from loved ones and homeland. After all, they had not asked for such a thing. It would be painful for them to open this Pandora's box. On the other hand, they did not have free choice in this matter. They had never had the opportunity to be exposed to such ideas. It is often said that knowledge is power. I did truly want to empower this family – both parents and child.

Thankfully, a surprising therapeutic development relieved much of my ambivalence. For the first time in many years, father mentioned his ex-wife's name in front of his daughter: Kalikadan. He applied what he had just learned about various feelings and openly admitted feeling guilty for keeping Piny from having any contact with her mother. He expressed concern to Piny about her mother's well-being in Ethiopia: "She is a good woman. It was just that we did not get along as man and wife. I have nothing against her. I just thought you would feel worse if you spoke with her, or if I mentioned her. I hope that she is alright. I have not heard anything about her for years. Where she lives they usually grow enough food unless the famines get very bad."

Moguba promised to try and call Kalikadan's village and let Piny speak to her.

He could not promise that this would work, but did say that from now on he and Piny could speak about Kalikadan from time to time. He proceeded to promise Piny that he would forbid his wife, Adamnesh, to hit his daughter. Daughter, upon hearing this, ran up to father, threw her arms around him and smiled. They cried together. I felt much satisfaction that the family had started to reclaim affect and communication about emotion, and was almost certain that should this be sustained, the family would make great strides in solving its problems, and that each of its members would function more optimally.

We met several more times after this in order to deepen the family system change that had taken place. In particular, I helped Adamnesh to openly express her feelings, for the first time, about Piny and how it was frustrating to raise another woman's child. Adamnesh felt significant relief after her own feelings had been validated and could start to reach out to the girl. Piny's last drawings were fundamentally different from those she had drawn at the start of our meetings. They were pictures of various sites and people she had encountered since coming to Israel. She had stopped drawing about Ethiopia and her loved ones who were still there.

Several months after I stopped meeting with Piny, the referring municipal social worker sent me a letter confirming that Piny's behaviour and school problems had all but vanished. Moreover, she had renewed contact with her mother, and uncles and cousins in Ethiopia and her relationship with both father and stepmother had become increasingly positive.

A Narrative of Social Work Practice with Ethiopian Israelis: A Family-Based Intervention for Domestic Violence

Yehuda, age 12, resided with his father, Moshe, age 34, mother, Yafa, age 32, and his two siblings, Miriam, age 15, and Dan, age 16 (names of all family members are pseudonyms). Recently they had moved from the immigrant absorption centre, where they had lived three years, to their own apartment in the community. They received a very large grant from the government in order to purchase

the home. Father worked as a grocery store clerk and mother as a cleaner in a local shopping mall, both at minimum wage.

The family was referred to me for treatment by the municipal social worker. She had received a complaint from Yehuda's school that on several occasions he had drawn pictures that portrayed people hitting each other. When asked by his teacher to explain, he adamantly refused. I arranged to meet the family in their home.

I quickly found the building where they lived. It was in a run down part of town where I had been many times before on client home visits. It was important for me not to be late for our scheduled meeting time and I found myself running up the several flights of stairs to their apartment. I knocked on the door and a tall, strikingly pretty woman answered. With a warm smile she invited me inside. She had been working on her daughter's intricate hair braids in the middle of the very small living room. I could not help but stare as mother took such great care to manipulate each strand of hair into its precise position. While she worked, Yafa intermittently hugged and caressed her daughter, and also spoke with her. I sensed that mother was making a painstaking effort to communicate with Miriam in Hebrew. This scene triggered memories of my own children, whom, upon immigrating to Israel at a young age, insisted that I speak Hebrew with them instead of my native English. When out in public with me, they became highly embarrassed when I spoke English rather than Hebrew like everyone else.

Approximately half an hour later Moshe and Yehuda came in through the front door. I told myself that it was important to accept that their sense of time may be different than mine, and I made no mention of the delay. Father immediately and without any apparent hesitation, instructed Yafa to prepare "the guest" coffee and popcorn, a favourite combination in Ethiopia.

I was confronted with yet another dilemma that seemed relevant for social workers practicing with many immigrant and refugee populations. I asked myself whether I should accept and cooperate with the patriarchal family structure unfolding before me, or should

I openly challenge it as contradictory to professional values I hold very dear: most importantly, the inherent integrity and value of every human being. And what about individual self determination? It is painful for me to think of relegating these principles to a matter of simple lip service.

At the moment I felt uncomfortable being waited on by a person who is obligated to serve me on the basis of her gender. Miriam said nothing as she handed me the bowl of popcorn. However I imagined that after three years in Israel, most of which she has worked outside of the home, she felt at least somewhat conflicted about her husband's gender-based expectations of her. I was also concerned about what the children were learning from seeing their mother act in such a compliant fashion toward their father and how they may transpose this undesirable learning to their own nuclear families one day. On the other hand, as a social worker I have been taught to respect the culture of our clients, as well as their culturally-bound family structures. Furthermore, if I was to confront the patriarchal nature of their family relations I might inadvertently cause father to use more aggressive means to hold on to his power, which would lead to suffering for Yafa and the children.

When Yafa brought our refreshments I simply thanked her and began our session. As it seemed paramount that I build a therapeutic relationship with the family, and in particular with the father, whom I perceived as the family's gatekeeper, I decided to relay the school's concerns about Yehuda in a general manner. I chose to refrain from showing them Yehuda's drawings at this time.

Next, I took ample time to explain to Moshe and the others, in very basic Hebrew, about the social work profession. It was hard for them to understand but father appeared to accept my announcement that I wanted to meet with them in order to help further strengthen their family. I emphasized how they must be very strong in order to undergo a difficult immigration from another continent. I suggested that initially we meet several times, in order that I may get to know them better and thus have a more solid foundation for any

subsequent conjoint work. I intentionally concluded my sincere invitation with some self disclosure regarding my own immigration:

“When I first came to Israel everything seemed up side down. But after a couple of years I could begin to look at all that had happened, at all that I had gone through, along with my family, from the moment we decided to move from Canada, to packing our things, to flying and landing at Ben Gurion airport, to our first grocery shopping, and so much more that occurred in those first months and years in Israel.”

Immediately upon finishing my remarks father took my hand, and in Ethiopian style, bid me farewell, telling me how I may come to his home the same time next week.

When I next returned we all gathered in the living room, with our usual coffee and popcorn. I requested that father, and his wife and children, tell me the full story of their immigration –from their departure and separation from Ethiopia, to their dramatic transport and complex resettlement in Israel. I assured them that this virtual journey could take as long as they wanted, that it would not have to be limited to today’s meeting. Indeed, father began what would be the detailed narration, by all the family members, of the family’s remarkable journey through time and space.

“We were brought by the people from the secret service and Jewish agency from our village to Gondor. Many of us lived together in the same compound. They gave us what we needed; the children learned Hebrew and we learned about life in Israel. They showed us toilets and stoves, that was the first time I saw such things. We dreamed of going to Jerusalem, the holiest of holies.”

“One day they told us we would be leaving very soon. In a couple days buses came and took us to the airport. That was the first time I ever saw an airplane. It was scary. The children thought it would crash. They had no idea what kept the big bird up in the air. Myself, I had gotten used to Gondor and I already missed it. We had it very good there. The food on the airplane was so strange, I missed my own food.”

“When we landed everyone kissed the ground. I could not. I will never forget when I first stepped out the door. It was all different – the trees, the air, the sunlight, the color of the ground.”

“After a few months I could see what was happening. The kids were doing well. They learned Hebrew fast. They started to be embarrassed when I spoke Amharic. They still loved me but they didn’t listen to me like before. My wife quickly found a job. This changed her a lot. She stopped doing what I wanted. She started arguing with me. It started with the money she earned, she wanted some of that money for herself. For me, it was harder to learn Hebrew. I couldn’t find work. I missed the ways things used to be, the landscape, the food, Amharic, no ‘ferangees.’ Mainly I missed the way our family used to be. In Ethiopia they respected me.”

Eventually mother and children joined father in the telling of their accounts of the immigration. Together they shared their personal and moving stories with me. After three meetings they showed the few black and white photos they had managed to bring with them from Ethiopia. After three meetings they were feeding me anjara bread topped with shero (lentil paste). The story and the storytelling had brought us much closer.

It was at that point in the therapeutic process that I believed I could attempt to share with them the pictures Yehuda had drawn at school that had so concerned his teacher. However, beforehand, I reminded the family, and especially father, that I was here to help and that I in no way intended to cause them harm. Father nodded his head and told me to take the drawings out of my backpack and show them to him.

The first moment Moshe glanced at the pictures he immediately blurted out that the pictures were of him and his wife. Without hesitation he admitted that he had been hitting his wife when he was drunk, and that since coming to Israel he had been drinking too much beer. He spoke about the violence in a rather matter of fact manner, as if striking his wife was relatively acceptable. I found myself facing another dilemma. I wondered whether I should attempt to accept a style of marital relations and communication that normative in Ethiopia, in contrast to Israel, where marital violence is strictly prohibited. Or, should I attempt to widen this family's idiosyncratic reservoir of knowledge, by pumping new information into the system? There was much to share with them about the western concept of abuse: its causes, effects, even its trans-generational implications.

A turning point in therapy occurred when we were sitting all together in the living room, and I was speaking about the multidirectional relationship between child abuse and domestic violence. Without much prior indication, father began to cry and proceeded to disclose to his wife and children something important he had never shared with them before. Visibly moved, he described how, as a boy, he saw his own father beating his mother, and how he used to do all that he could to get between his parents' blows. "I now see that I grew up with abuse and that I also abuse my own wife today. But what was OK in Ethiopia is not OK in Israel. I don't want to be like my father anymore. Itzhak, can you help with that?"

In light of the family leader's overt and heartfelt request for assistance from me, I believed that a window of opportunity had opened for important multi-systemic work –

with individuals in the family, as well as with various dyads and triads.

I began with a series of individual meetings with father that focused on further identifying and processing the multiple losses he had incurred during his emigration and resettlement. Together we explored the concepts of traumatic loss and separation, post traumatic responses, post traumatic stress disorder and post traumatic growth. In addition, I helped Moshe locate potential friends in his new community and build a more effective support network. During our final meetings together I succeeded in persuading him to attend an outpatient substance abuse treatment program.

Next I held numerous conjoint meetings with Moshe and Yafa. In a largely blame free atmosphere, we worked to deepen each partner's understanding of the losses and advantages the other had experienced through their emigration from the known to the unknown. Most prominent here, I helped Moshe identify and clearly express to Yafa his perceived significant loss of gender and age-related power and influence in the family. I helped him openly express to his wife his sadness over this loss, as well as his abundant fears about a possible future loss of power. Of particular therapeutic value, in these meetings Yafa was able to affirm her husband's difficulty and declare her continued desire to support him, as well as their family unit as a whole.

I also convened a series of important meetings between father and children. Here, the focus was on helping Yehuda, Miriam and Dan increase their empathy for their father and what he had experienced in the last several years. I succeeded in persuading the children to more actively support Moshe emotionally. As a result, the three children together asked their father to sit down with them every Sabbath and tell them about life in Ethiopia. They also agreed to request from father that he teach them Amharic, which had always been very important to father.

The family appeared to fare much better through the course of therapy. There were no additional complaints about Yehuda's well being from his school. Father had more or less stopped drinking alcohol to excess and so had

also managed to refrain from hitting—or more accurately—abusing, his wife. Despite his relative progress, father maintained his bi-weekly attendance at a local substance abuse treatment program. The relationship between Moshe and Yafa had strengthened, as did father's relationship with his children. Yehuda, Miriam, and Dan were learning Amharic and could even speak in simple sentences, which made father extremely proud. Most important, father began taking his own Hebrew language study more seriously and eventually found a job at a nearby grocery store. This raised the family's standard of living significantly as well as father's self-esteem. Ultimately Moshe became a leader in the local Ethiopian Jewish community and devoted a good portion of his spare time to helping his fellow Ethiopian immigrants.

Concluding Remarks

It has largely been due to the validation I have received from my Ethiopian Israeli social work students that I give public voice to my narratives of professional helping. During lively classroom discussions they have encouraged my family-centered, home based and respectful approach. They have echoed my belief that these are essential elements for a social work practice that will ultimately empower Beta Israel families. My students have especially applauded the professional "chutzpah" (audacity) required to squarely put on the table of the Ethiopian Israeli family such fundamentally new concepts as feelings, separation, trauma, loss, and abuse.

Postscript

It is June 1, 2011, just two weeks days before submitting this manuscript. My Ethiopian students inform me that after our social work practice with families class there will be a memorial service in the college auditorium for the "heroes" of Beta Israel who perished during their immigration to Israel. Each year on Jerusalem Day the Israeli government and public, and in particular, the Ethiopian community, pay homage, in memorial services held throughout the country, to the more than 4,000 men, women, and children

who tragically lost their lives on their treacherous journey to "Jerusalem."

Approximately 500 students and professors from a range of academic departments fill the front half of the hall. The service is very respectful, but at the same time relatively brief; a sad song, a couple of poems about the Beta Israel immigration, and a short black and white movie showing film footage of the suffering of Beta Israel as they crossed Sudan prior to being airlifted to Israel.

At the end, just as in every public gathering held in Israel, we are all requested to rise for the singing of the national anthem, "Hatikvah" (hope). I am overwhelmed with emotion. Here I am in southern Israel, the son of Russian Jewish immigrants to Canada, paying my respects to the memory of Jews who lived in the remote northern mountains of Ethiopia, who, like me, had a dream of the reunification of the Jewish people in their homeland, where together we might become a "light unto the nations."

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Itzhak Lander, Ph.D., is a lecturer at the Department of Social Work, Sapir College, Hof Ashkelon, Israel. Comments regarding this article can be sent to: Larrie@zahav.net.il

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