

A MOST PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Operation Moses

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Operation Moses was an extraordinary rescue achieved by the Jewish world. Efforts by a combination of the Israeli and U.S. governments and Israeli and U.S.-based organizations resulted in this dramatic airlift of Ethiopian Jews to Israel. This article describes the critical role of the United Israel Appeal and the Jewish Agency in this effort.

Community organization is difficult to define with precision. Yet there is agreement in the Jewish world that the basic working arrangement is a partnership between practitioner and volunteer. Rarely is the professional completely on his or her own or authorized to function without significant lay participation and oversight (Goldman, 1981).

Operation Moses was a singular exception to this rule.

The first mass rescue movement of Ethiopian Jews to Israel required a high degree of secrecy. For that reason, the United Israel Appeal (UIA) professionals in the United States and Israel who helped in the planning and execution of this difficult and clandestine transfer did so without the usual volunteer involvement. This is our story.

BACKGROUND TO OPERATION MOSES

History records that a Jewish Kingdom held sway in much of Ethiopia in the 13th Century. In later years, there were forced mass conversions, discrimination against the survivors, and the application of the term "Falashas" (strangers) to those Jews remaining in isolated villages. Several events in the late 1970s dramatically altered the fate of our brethren in Africa, culminating in their exodus from Ethiopia to a new beginning in Eretz Yisrael.

In America, agitation on behalf of the

Ethiopian Jews began then, prompted in part by the efforts of the recently formed American Association for Ethiopian Jewry (AAEJ). The Chicago-based organization, founded by Graenam Berger, raised funds and national awareness of the plight of the Falashas. The issue soon found its way onto the agenda of the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations (now the United Jewish Communities—UJC). The leadership of the North American Jewish community began to take the issue seriously.

In Israel, Sephardic Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef ruled that the Ethiopian Jews were descendants of the Tribe of Dan and therefore entitled to live in Israel under the Law of Return. The Prime Minister's office for "secret aliyah activity" began a series of modest-scale rescue missions, which resulted in a small but steady stream of Ethiopian Jews to Israel.

The Communist-led dictatorship in power in Ethiopia at that time was determined to stop any leave-takings and dealt harshly with anyone caught or suspected of preparing to escape the country. Thus, the need for utmost secrecy (Gruber, 1987; Kessler, 1982; Leslau, 1951; Parfit, 1985).

NEW YORK I (KESSLER)

Although UIA was criticized during the early 1970s for an apparent lack of interest in the fate of Ethiopian Jews, the truth was

different. In Israel for the Jewish Agency meetings, Melvin Dubinsky, past chairman of UIA, and later Jerold Hoffberger, Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Jewish Agency, and I began regular meetings with the head of the Prime Minister's office that dealt with "secret aliyah activity." There were periodic briefings about rescue attempts that were bringing small numbers of Ethiopian Jews to Israel. We were warned that open discussion could cause lives to be lost.

The Grant

In 1972, the UIA was chosen to administer expenditures under the U.S. Grant for Rescue and Resettlement in Israel of refugees from the USSR and other Communist countries, using the Jewish Agency as its operating agent.

The Grant was administered by the Refugee Affairs Office of the U.S. Department of State. During President Carter's administration (1976-80), the Office became interested in assisting refugees from other parts of the world who were "in search of their human rights." This new and expanded emphasis gave reason to hope that the Grant and governmental assistance could be used for Ethiopian Jews.

In 1979, Akiva Lewinsky, Treasurer of the Jewish Agency, and I met with Stuart Eizenstadt, Jewish liaison in the Carter White House, to discuss the Grant and other foreign policy issues that were being reshaped by worldwide events such as the upheaval in Iran.

During the meeting Eizenstadt was polite, yet reserved—a very correct public servant. Lewinsky explained the work of the Jewish Agency inside the Soviet Union and the process of moving migrant families to Israel using a transit stop. He assured Eizenstadt that the Grant was being used appropriately.

I remarked that it was unfortunate that President Carter did not receive credit for these resettlement efforts. The Grant did not appear in the President's Budget, and all UIA negotiations were handled through House

Committee and State Department personnel. Eizenstadt was obviously interested in this argument, so I continued.

I suggested that President Carter could increase the resettlement activity by adding two additional refugee groups: Ethiopian Jews and the Iranian Jewish community. Eizenstadt quickly agreed, and promised to relay these suggestions. Both recommendations were implemented by the Carter administration within a few months.

United Nations (UN) Refugee Camps

The situation changed dramatically in 1984, when Ethiopian Jews began arriving at UN-run Refugee Camps on the border with Sudan. Thousands of men, women, and children walked hundreds of hazardous miles across the desert to get to the camps. The facilities offered relative safety for the Jews, but at an enormous price—near-starvation, unsanitary conditions, and anti-Jewish persecution.

At this time—late in President Reagan's first term—Eugene Douglas, a political appointee, directed the U.S. Refugee Affairs unit. His deputy director was a former Jewish communal service worker, Richard (Dick) Krieger. They had a significant interest in our concerns for the Ethiopians and our desire to rescue our co-religionists.

Many Ethiopian Jews were affected by various illnesses that swept through the camps in summer 1984. In response to our special representation, the UN Refugee Affairs Unit (UNRA) dispatched a Swedish medical team to the camps, and many lives were saved.

Israeli military personnel were now—surreptitiously and with great danger—spiriting small groups of Ethiopian Jews out of the camps and to Israel. However, this small trickle could not begin to relieve the pressures building in the Sudan camps. The UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) warned of serious overcrowding and contagious illnesses. It was time to make a move.

In the fall of 1984, James Purcell, Director for Refugee Affairs, U.S. Department of State,

made a dramatic request: Would I join a small planning group meeting in Geneva to discuss the fate of Ethiopian Jews in Sudan? I reluctantly demurred due to a health concern. I asked UIA Jerusalem Office Director, Neale Katz, to undertake this critically important assignment in my stead.

JERUSALEM AND GENEVA (KATZ)

In October 1984, I flew to Geneva, Switzerland with Yehuda Dominitz. Upon arrival we met with Princeton Lyman, Director, East Africa Unit, U.S. Department of State; Richard Krieger; and Jerry Weaver, U.S. State Department representative in Khartoum, Sudan for the past six years (Jerry Weaver's key role is described in Kaplan, 1994).

Weaver, a former Ohio University football player who received his doctorate in political science from UCLA, made a startling announcement. He had purchased and stored 500 gallons of gasoline to fuel buses transporting Ethiopian Jews from the UN refugee camps to waiting aircraft, which would fly them to Israel.

The plan to rescue and transport Ethiopian Jews to Israel, later code-named Operation Moses, was well developed. To become operational required just an "OK" from the U.S. State Department, Israeli authorities, and the Intergovernmental Committee on Migration, according to Weaver.

A second meeting was convened the following day. One person was added to the group—Efraim HaLevy, the Mossad's "point man" for the movement of Ethiopian Jews to Israel. (HaLevy was later appointed Israeli Ambassador to the European Community, and then served as Director of the Mossad.)

The morning segment of the meeting was dominated by Weaver's detailed explanation of the proposed rescue and flight arrangements, as well as the methods to be used to identify the Jews in the refugee camps. Toward the end of the discussion, someone stated that the flights alone will cost about \$12 million and asked, "How will we pay for it?" All eyes turned toward me.

"No problem. The funds will come from UIA," I heard myself answer.

I thought of a recent Board of Governors' meeting of the Jewish Agency where Max Fisher said that there should never be a situation where Jews at risk would not be rescued due to lack of money. Somehow, I was convinced we would secure the necessary funding.

The afternoon session was devoted to various technical details of the mission. Toward the end of the meeting, we were told that the entire operation required the highest level of secrecy. In fact, we were instructed not to use the telephone or telex to contact anyone not already party to the rescue mission.

Therefore, in order to discuss the mission and its funding with the appropriate persons in New York and Zurich. I had to travel by plane immediately to both cities. On October 9th, 1984, I arrived in New York and briefed Harold Goldberg, UIA Comptroller. The following day I discussed the mission with Jerold Hoffberger, Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Jewish Agency, and Irving Kessler. I then flew to Zurich to meet my colleagues in the U.S. State Department: Gene Dewey, Deputy Director of the Bureau of Refugee Programs, and Judy Chavchavadze of the Bureau Staff overseeing the UIA grant.

NEW YORK II (KESSLER)

Neale reported to me on the several decisions of the planning group. The UIA was to serve as "paymaster" for an airlift of all "Beta Israel" in the UN-run refugee camps in the Sudan, beginning in early November. The refugees would be flown by Trans European Airways (headquartered in Brussels) from Khartoum to an airfield in Europe, and then on to Israel.

UIA was committed to pay the airline for each passenger via bank transfers from New York to Brussels. At this point we did not know what the full magnitude of the airlift would be, how many flights would be required, or what the cost per passenger would be.

Line of Credit

Neale, UIA Comptroller Harold Goldberg, and I agreed that our first task was to secure a \$5,000,000 line of credit, which could be instantly utilized when required. Such a financial undertaking usually required organizational process and significant volunteer involvement. However, we further agreed that the need for secrecy in Operation Moses precluded this important lay-professional operational modality.

We presented the issue to Irwin Field, UIA Chairman. Irwin courageously took full responsibility for authorizing the securing of the credit from our banks. Hal and I made several phone calls and secured the needed credit, thanks to the very strong reputation UIA had developed in banking circles. We were now able to send a signal to Washington and Jerusalem that the UIA was onboard and ready to play its small but important role in the operation.

General Assembly

The next weeks leading up to the November 1984 General Assembly (GA) in Toronto brought us personal and professional agony. The U.S. State Department contact informed us that the first planes were about to leave the Sudan. We were greatly concerned about maintaining secrecy and so were unable to respond to constant attacks by Canadian and U.S. pro-Ethiopian groups alleging inaction by UIA and the Jewish Agency.

A special session on the Ethiopian situation was held at the GA, featuring Eugene Douglas, the political chairman of the Refugee Affairs Office of the State Department. Yet, the star of the meeting turned out to be a young Beta Israel woman, brought to the conference by a Canadian group. She dramatically charged the Jewish world with neglect and indifference as her brethren died. Official replies to the effect that "we are trying" were unconvincing. The session was a shambles. Leon Dulzin, then Chair of the Jewish Agency's Executive, promised a quick rescue effort.

Special Fundraising Effort

Dulzin convened an emergency meeting of UJA, UIA, and Zionist leadership as soon as we returned to New York from the GA. The Chairman announced that the rescue effort for Ethiopian Jews was at hand and demanded that a special fund-raising campaign be mounted immediately to pay the costs of the undertaking.

I argued against starting any fund-raising campaign prior to the rescue effort, fearing that the resulting publicity would negate the secrecy required for the successful completion of the mission. I calculated that the rescue effort would take approximately three months, and recommended that fundraising be delayed until then. My concerns were pushed aside.

Stanley Horowitz, then UJA President, called a meeting of federation executives to enlist their support in the fundraising program. I did succeed in getting the group's agreement to avoid using the media in their campaigns. Nonetheless, within ten days, I was receiving numerous inquiries about the mission and the fund-raising effort from various news organizations. In response to their questions, I lied, denying any knowledge of the plan or its financing.

Operation Moses Begins

The first planes carrying Ethiopian Jews from refugee camps in the Sudan to freedom in Israel took off during Thanksgiving Day Weekend, 1984. There was great relief and excitement at UIA headquarters when the first manifest and request for payment arrived.

Although I had asked repeatedly for routing information, such details were denied in keeping with the need for maximum secrecy. What was obvious from the manifest was the large number of Beta Israel crammed into every available space on the Boeing 707s being used to transport them to an undisclosed location in Europe, and then on to Israel.

NEW YORK AND JERUSALEM (KATZ AND KESSLER)

As the planes began to land in Israel, UIA offices in Jerusalem and New York moved quickly: checking flight manifests against the count of Jewish agency personnel, compiling statistics and preparing fiscal accounts for U.S. Government Refugee Grant Reports, and assisting at the reception center in Ashkelon.

Information from both the Israeli Aliyah and Youth Aliyah Departments was assembled during subsequent months, and reported at the CJF Spring 1985 Quarterly Meeting. We reported that the Jewish Agency had received 14,354 Ethiopian Jews in the past twelve months, 70 percent of whom arrived from December 1984 to March 1985. Amigour, the JAFI Housing Management Company, assigned more than 400 apartments to house the Ethiopian families in the same period.

A Dramatic Conclusion

A dramatic conclusion to the rescue of Ethiopian Jews came in March 1985. Then U.S. Vice President George Bush, using the prestige of President Ronald Reagan, demanded transfer to Israel of the 800 Beta Israel who remained stranded in the Sudan. If the Sudanese government agreed, Bush was prepared to un-freeze a major U.S. aid grant to that country. Sudan's President Neimiri approved of the movement, insisting however that no Israelis be involved in the process.

In a one-day operation in late March, U.S. Air Corps transports evacuated the remaining Beta Israel, flying them directly to Israel. Neither the UIA nor the Jewish community was asked for financial reimbursement. Bush's courageous actions never received the public recognition they deserved. His close friend, Max Fisher, describes Bush's role in his biography (Golden, 1992).

REFLECTIONS (KATZ)

The Geneva meetings impressed on me the need for absolute secrecy, which made it

easier for me to sit through the 1984 General Assembly while the Establishment was being attacked for inaction. I was forbidden to meet the initial planeload of Ethiopian refugees at the Israeli airport later that month because Ephraim HaLevy of Israel's Intelligence Service mistakenly thought that I worked for the UJA, which had already mounted its fundraising drive in the United States. Meanwhile the UJA Campaign Chair received permission from the Prime Minister's Office to lead a group of "Campaign Givers" in greeting this first planeload.

A few years later I learned that Jerry Weaver, who designed and directed every detail of the rescue in the Sudan at great risk to himself, had been separated "under a cloud" from the U.S. Foreign Service. No one had as yet recognized his achievements on behalf of our people. With the help of a few generous friends in 1994, I invited him to visit Israel as our honored guest.

One of our first stops was a Youth Aliyah Village where a group of Ethiopian children were students. Some reported that they had passed through the camps, Tawawa and Umel Rekuba. Jerry asked how they traveled from the camp to the airfield. One of the girls replied, "On a bus, kind of a truck with benches." Jerry laughed as he recalled that after he received the go-ahead, he visited Saudi Arabia and purchased four trucks, which were shipped to Khartoum. There he hired an ironmonger to build the benches used by these girls.

Since this Israel trip where he met Irving Kessler as well, I have heard from Weaver a number of times; most recently he noted an interest in producing a television show based on his Sudan adventures. It is obvious that his pride in this achievement is some compensation for difficulties he experienced afterward.

Similarly, Yehuda Dominitz, who designed and directed the Israeli and Jewish Agency roles in Operation Moses, shares his memories frequently. He remains strangely silent, however, about unfair accusations that he caused the news leak about Operation Moses,

which stranded hundreds of refugees in their camps. Our common compensation truly comes from the successful movement of our brethren to Israel during the years that followed. Almost a decade later Operation Solomon left only a few behind. Today I encounter Israelis born in Ethiopia in every level of Israeli society, and I join them in their efforts to rescue close relatives who had previously converted to Christianity.

REFLECTIONS (KESSLER)

Operation Moses showed clearly that large-scale fundraising is incompatible with maximum secrecy, that an honest, trusting relationship between volunteer leadership and professionals is a highly valuable asset when decisions must be made without lay input, and that not all those instrumental in a successful project receive the recognition they deserve.

Operation Moses confirmed that large sums of money cannot be raised and still maintain a high degree of secrecy. Federations and Keren Hayesod, ignoring UIA requests, printed public notices and held public gatherings as part of their fundraising efforts.

We were informed in early January 1985 that the Sudanese government had curtailed all flights following Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres' authorized acknowledgment of the operation after it became public knowledge, due in large part to the publicity surrounding the fundraising.

Much of the work undertaken by the UIA staff with respect to Operation Moses was done without lay knowledge or involvement. Such an unusual breaching of the lay-professional relationship was made possible by the trusting and positive relationship built up over a long period of time between the agency

chairman and the executive vice chairman. The trusting relationship also extended to the members of the UIA Board of Directors, who only received a broad report on staff involvement in Operation Moses when Neale Katz reported on the details six months later.

Many in the American Jewish community received public recognition for their roles in the successful transfer of Ethiopian Jews to Israel. However, my colleagues, Neale Katz and Yehuda Dominitz, garnered no accolades for their seminal contribution to the operation. Overlooked as well were Jerry Weaver, Eugene Douglas, and James Purcell. It is hoped that with the publication of this article they will receive the recognition so long denied.

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