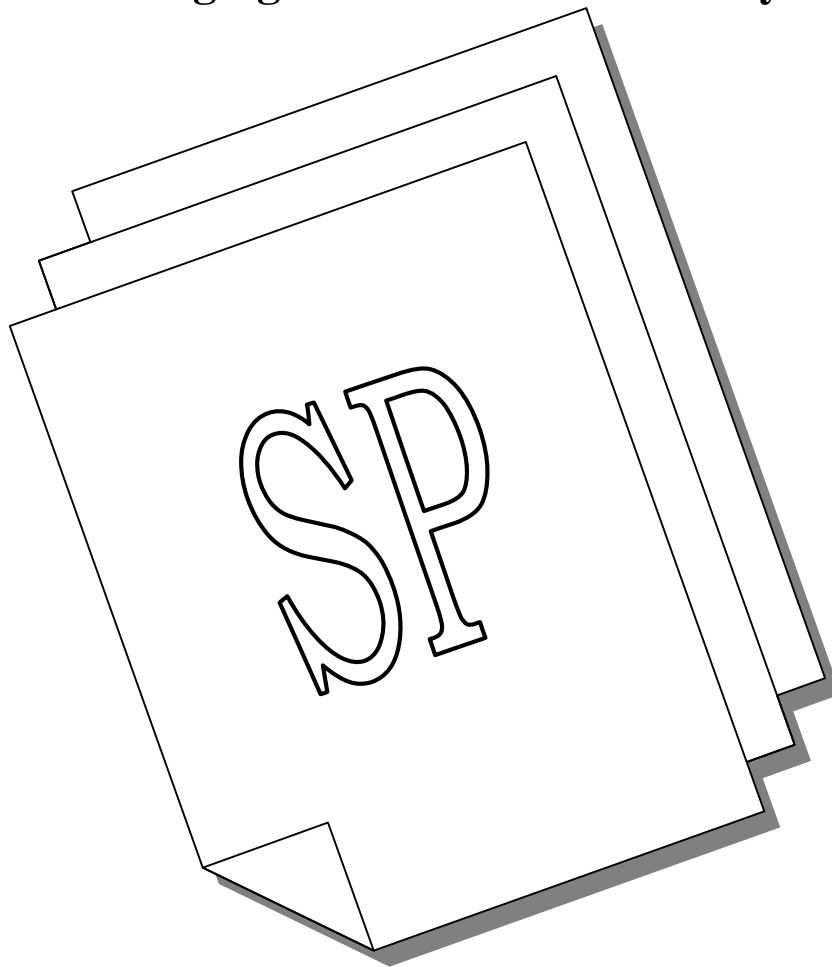


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Ethiopian Religious Leaders of the 1.5 Generation: Between Integration and Resistance

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Abstract

This pilot ethnographic study presents and compares the narratives of the two kinds of religious leaders emerging from the ranks of the 1.5 generation of Ethiopian immigrants. The one is traditional spiritual leaders (*kessoch*) whose authority draws on the ancestral tradition and knowledge passed from father to son; the other is rabbis trained and ordained in Israeli religious institutions and now serving in local rabbinical councils across Israel. The first group is not recognized by the religious establishment but enjoys respect within their communities; the second is formally recognized (and allowed to perform most ritual functions) but located on the margins of the rabbinical establishment and lacks true authority. The paper discusses the emerging conflict between these leaders through the theoretical lenses of syncretism and social inclusion/exclusion.

Introduction

The Jews of Ethiopia were brought to Israel in two major waves: “Operation Moses” in 1984 and “Operation Solomon” in 1991, complemented by subsequent family unification processes. In Israel they contend with discrimination, prejudice and social alienation and are shunted to the margins of society (Kaplan and Salomon, 2004; Corinaldi, 2005). The debate concerning the authenticity of their Judaism further exacerbated their exclusion. While the Ethiopian immigrants gained collective recognition as Jews, the Jewishness of each individual was called into question. In order to be registered as Jews in the population registry, those who arrived on the first wave from Ethiopia were required to undergo a strict conversion process that included circumcision and immersion in a ritual bath (Anteby-Yemini, 2005). They regarded this requirement as a humiliation and a manifestation of racism, and following protests and demonstrations held in 1985 the chief rabbinate eventually reversed its

position. A compromise was reached whereby a special rabbi was nominated as national marriage registrar, authorized to check the Jewishness of couples who registered for marriage. He was succeeded by Rabbi Hadana, who serves as chief rabbi of the Ethiopian immigrants (Corinaldi, 2005).

The doubt cast on the Ethiopian immigrants' Jewishness seriously impaired the status of the *kessoch* (traditional religious leaders) in Israel (Weil, 1997: 191). In the wake of a campaign waged by Ethiopian activists, in 1993 the establishment recognized some of the *kessoch* who nowadays receive a salary to work in their communities (Kaplan & Salomon, 2004). Yet their authority has been limited and they do not deal with matters of marriage, divorce, ritual slaughter, burial, and so forth, since their customs are based on the original written law, which differs from current rabbinical *halakha*. The difference derives from the Ethiopian Jews' long years of isolation from the Jewish people, from oral law, and from the innovations introduced to Jewish *halakha*.

The Ethiopian family underwent many transformations and shocks as their traditionalism encountered Israeli postmodernism. The undermining of traditional patriarchal family structure and the departure of the children to boarding schools eroded the authority of the parents, and particularly that of the father. While men tended to lose their authority and roles, mothers and children adapted more rapidly to their new life, resulting in severe conflict and even violence within the family (Weil, 1991; Minuchin-Izikson et al., 1997). While many Ethiopian youths who completed school in Israel and served in the army strongly identify with their new country, their Ethiopian identity remains important, influencing their lifestyle and decisions (Shabtai, 1999, 2006). Over the last decade, young Ethiopians have established their own community organizations to reinforce mutual support and claim respect for their culture and origin (Sadan, 2009: 59).

In response to the formal and informal racism exhibited by the Israeli establishment in the spheres of education, housing, religion and health, many Ethiopian youngsters develop a hybrid identity (Ben Eliezer, 2008). It incorporates resistance and separatism manifested in delinquent and criminal behavior alongside the attempt to become part of the mainstream Israeli youth culture. By employing subversive practices, they seek to challenge the binary distinction between black and white that puts them in an inferior position. In asserting this hybrid identity, the youngsters study their native Amharic, make nostalgic trips to their home villages in Ethiopia, and some readopt their original names. The young Ethiopians' subversive identity and shuttle movement between different cultural worlds is also manifested in listening to Ethiopian, Israeli and world music, particularly Black rock and hip-pop (Shabtai, 2001).

Theoretical framework

Rather paradoxically, despite their marked physical visibility the Ethiopian immigrants are in fact deemed "invisible" within Israel's public sphere and renders them socially vulnerable (Anteby-Yemini, 2010). According to Lomsky-Feder and Rapoport (2010: 17-18), the migrants' invisibility "is the result of social stratification. It ascribes and pushes the individual toward negation and absence. Refusal to recognize a human being as a person of intrinsic value is a deliberate act that generates in the observed person a sense of being erased or being transparent."

Both the visibility and invisibility of migrants typically involve their identification as strangers and their classification as Others. They acquire the status of an “imagined visible” in the local peoples’ consciousness (Ahmed, 2000). A relationship based on power exists between the local and the stranger, between the observer and the observed. According to Foucault (1980), the open, inspecting eye is a source of power. Thus, the gaze inherent in the social power structure is invariably political in nature. Following Foucault, one may argue that as a stranger, the migrant is an object of a piercing gaze that s/he cannot return. Migrants are therefore subject to more direct and violent means of control than are the locals (Lomsky-Feder and Rapoport, 2010:14).

The subject of the “stranger” has been widely discussed, starting from Simmel (1950 [1908]) who used the concept to describe the way of life of the modern city and its boundaries within an individualistic and bureaucratic society. Beck (1966) and Bauman (1999) have likewise drawn on the concept of foreignness in discussing national minorities and cultural strangers. They maintain that the stranger is often construed as the Other, who resembles the members of the group in some respects but differs from it in many others, deemed more salient, and thus occupies a position beyond, or close to, the social boundary.

The present study illuminates singular groups of young Ethiopian Israelis, which have not previously been studied: young community leaders who contend for their status and future roles. One of these groups comprises young *kessoch*, some of whom were ordained in Ethiopia, others in Israel, and a few not at all. Only some of them occupy formal positions as spiritual leaders of their communities. The second group comprises young Ethiopian community rabbis who were trained by the Israeli religious bodies and serve on the religious councils of Israeli towns. The majority studied in seminaries belonging to the national religious movement. The study sheds light on the contested spiritual leadership within the excluded and powerless ethnic minority group, as well as its resistance to exclusion and struggles to become part of Israeli mainstream. Since both types of spiritual leaders (lay and official) function in the same communities, it is instructive to examine the latent and explicit power relations between them.

The *kessoch* and rabbis who participated in this study were born in Ethiopia and immigrated to Israel with their parents as older children or adolescents. They thus belong to the “1.5 generation” of immigrants (Lev Ari, 2010; Remennick, 2003), whose experiences of absorption differed from that of the native-born second generation. This segment of immigrant youth has often exhibited extreme forms of maladjustment, tending toward opposition to the absorbing society’s language and cultural values. At the same time, they strive to integrate with it in order to resolve their identity conflict. Studies have shown that ethnic acts of resistance were observed among young migrants belonging to minority groups in western countries, whose physical “visibility” exposed them to discrimination (Scott, 1990; Remennick, 2003; Lomsky-Feder et al., 2010).

Relying on this theoretical outline, we examine the poles of resistance and assimilation, through which we seek to portray and compare the behavior of the two groups. We surmise that the rabbis tend to adopt a strategy of assimilation, owing to their training and dependence on the local establishment. The *kessoch*, who are largely excluded by the establishment, are expected to resort to the tactics of protest and resistance.

Methodology

Our qualitative research drew on in-depth interviews and their interpretative analysis. This method rests on the narrative research approach (Tuval-Massiah and Spector-Merzel, 2010), which seeks to understand the individual's subjective experience. The narrative revealed to the interviewer is the informants' tool to lend meaning to the events that occur in their life, to understand and organize them. The narrative thus not only describes reality but also shapes and gives meaning to it (Lieblich et al, 1998).

The researcher's role is to examine the reality created by the symbols that people use when describing their lives. This imagined reality is our object of research (Shelsky and Alpert, 2007). In the postmodern era the community boundaries become blurred and migrants' identities (individual and collective) are reshaped. The social marginality of the visibly-different migrants in the new country leads them to seek a "suitable" place in the new social fabric (Ben-Ezer, 2010: 307).

This article presents a sample of in-depth interviews conducted between 2009 and 2011. We interviewed twelve young rabbis, now mostly in their thirties, fluent in Hebrew; most of them had served in the army, and some of them come from families of *kessoch*. We likewise interviewed twelve young *kessoch* who belong to a body of 44 *kessoch* in various Ethiopian communities across Israel. We contacted the interviewees through an Ethiopian social worker. His presence in the research process opened doors that would typically remain closed to the "outsiders". In the ethnography that follows below, we chose to present several unmediated voices of our informants by means of their narratives quoted almost verbatim and at full length, assuming that they are speaking for themselves and require only minimal commentary by the researchers. Most informants' names are aliases; one asked to remain anonymous.

The kessoch

The subversive doll

Mengistu is a handsome 42 year-old man with a dignified bearing who immigrated to Israel in 1991. He wore a dress shirt and a traditional white tarbush on his head, his body draped in a white cloth. We met him in a synagogue located in a deprived neighborhood on the outskirts of a town in the Sharon area. He awaited us in a small side room, where he was studying the Torah. When asked about his role as a *kess*, Mengistu said:

I feel as though I am a doll in a display window. We are fully fledged kessoch, but we have no authority whatsoever... In Ethiopia I was a real kess; here I am a fictional kess: I dress like one, receive money from the Ministry of Religion, but I can't even officiate at my own daughter's wedding. I have no authority. I pray with my people but am not allowed to officiate at their weddings. I come to the wedding hall merely as a guest and they [the appointed rabbis] do everything... So I have the title of kess but don't perform any function, as if in a display window. Like I have a driver's license but can't drive because my license has been rescinded. Yet, I can't be too angry and destroy myself. My father was a kess, he also couldn't do a thing in Israel, the old kessoch didn't succeed either... My father was constantly sad since he arrived from Ethiopia, there he was an important person who was loved, and he often regretted coming here. I

am glad that I have succeeded my father, that I am the son of a kess.” Yet with his ten children he finds it difficult to meet the family’s needs on his modest income.

The Israeli religious establishment prohibits the *kessoch* from ritual slaughtering according to their customs, since these do not comply with the orthodox Jewish laws (Kogan and Mula, 2004). The Health Ministry likewise opposes the slaughter of animals generally conducted by the *kessoch* outside of abattoirs. Kess Mengistu complained:

I want to slaughter in an abattoir, but I am not allowed to; the meat that I slaughter in the forest is illegal, it’s a transgression. A police car arrives and they collect all the meat I slaughter and I receive a fine. We kessoch don’t buy and don’t eat from stores like lay people. This is a hard place, and one can’t fight for his dignity.

Norms relating to matters of impurity and purification were strictly adhered to in Ethiopia (Sharaby & Cicurel, 2007). Women went off to an isolated hut during menstruation and after giving birth, while the women of the extended family took over their duties. At the end of this period of isolation the women underwent a purification ritual performed by a *kess*. Kess Mengistu continued:

Here in Israel, my wife’s parents take her in after delivery, since there is no menstrual hut. My kids are at home, I tend to them when my wife goes off to her parents during menstruation. We had no choice but to relent on this matter. But she won’t prepare food for me during that time, I cook for myself or go to my mother’s home. I cannot help her with the ritual purification after her period either. The role of the kess in Israel is reduced only to general and prayer and remembrance prayers.

We gained the impression that Mengistu was living in two worlds, maintaining his private tradition on the one hand and involved in the Israel milieu on the other, while his children are being educated as Israelis. We sensed Mengistu’s repressed anger, which did not manifest in explicit emotional terms, but rather subdued as deep frustration. After a good deal of prompting, he eventually stated that they had been deprived of their dignity and were receiving money, and that the *kessoch* were not doing a thing to deserve the payment. This wise man and a born leader expressed the power of his emotions in a metaphoric way by saying that “we are like dolls in a display window.” This image implies disparagement toward his perceived token status and his interpretation of how Israeli society perceives him (one’s reflected image). He resolves the dissonance between his love for the Holy Land of Israel and his exclusion by claiming that “the country is good but the people make trouble.”

The simple laborer wearing the kess tarbush

Kess ArieH immigrated to Israel aged 18 in 1985 and served in the army. He claims to be 46, but looks younger. He maintains that he changed his Amharic name of his own free will. ArieH appears to be easy-going, giggles, looks disheveled and unkempt. He turned up wearing a long, stylish raincoat and a traditional tarbush on his head, which was too big for him. He was born into a family of *kessoch* in Ethiopia and ordained there as a *kess*. His title was not recognized in Israel and he therefore toils as a manual worker laying infrastructure for the telephone company. ArieH says that he removes his *kess*’ apparel while at work, but never parts with the *kess*’ tarbush, even when he “buries wires in the ground.” He recounted:

The establishment doesn't have to grant me the status of kess, I have it regardless of my day job. I am a kess, the unskilled work doesn't reduce my dignity, and I am active in the community after work... We dreamed of Jerusalem as a holy city, of the beautiful Israel of our imagination. I expected to find here a higher sort of religion but I found that everything was topsy-turvy. Religion here is chaotic, all because of modernity. Progress is unequal. Modernism creates the mess. Because of this "progress" people do not live well and are miserable. Science will develop even further and that will only harm us.

When asked if he is not angry about remaining unrecognized by the establishment, he replies:

That's the problem of those who don't accept me and not mine. What the institutionalized rabbinate is doing is to preserve its power; they claim that the Ethiopians are not sufficiently Jewish. The country is sacred but the people are burned out. There is no-one to turn to, only to God. I am disappointed with the people and politics. I can't accept the manner in which "those with black hats" [the official rabbis] perform the religious commandments.

Arie's demeanor and speech exhibit considerable defiance also manifested in his behavior. His non-recognition on the part of the establishment leads him toward the social margins, even within his own community. He is compelled to work hard in order to provide for his family and in his spare time attempts to lead the younger generation back to the sources of its tradition. Kess Arie served in the army, adopted a Western style of dress, speaks a decent Hebrew, and makes his own living, but he explicitly rejects the modernity and Israel society based on "science". He perceives modernity and "progress" as demeaning for his own ilk. In his straightforward manner he declared: "If you won't accept me, I won't accept you." His behavior clearly expresses ongoing passive resistance, alongside a selective acceptance of "components of reality" that suit him.

The entrepreneur politician

Kess Waba wore a white tarbush, a western suit and fashionable shoes, and sported a short beard. He proudly held a high-end cell phone. He is 42 years old, immigrated in 1991 and speaks fluent Hebrew. He took us to his community synagogue, alongside which stood a traditional round wooden structure (*tukul*) serving as a communal meeting place. The *kess*' home is not far from the synagogue, and his new, deluxe car is parked outside.

We were overjoyed when we arrived to the Holy Land. However, we encountered a shocking freedom of expression in all spheres; the lack of order within the family was equally hard to accept. Here we came across secularism while in the Diaspora we had adhered closely to religion. In Ethiopia everyone thought that Israel was a Holy Land flowing with milk and honey. The reality was painful. I was not recognized as a kess in Israel. Although I was among the first to gain recognition and a salary from the religious council, I have no formal role. If I am an Ethiopian kess, I should perform ritual slaughter, but I am not allowed to. The Ministry of Agriculture imposes veterinary supervision on us. We opened two abattoirs but both were shut down. Yet, sometimes we blame the state

unjustly. We shouldn't expect them to do things for us. We should do things for ourselves. Just as I take care of my home, I have to take care of ritual slaughter. Eventually I opened an abattoir myself, and now I have several butcher stores.

Waba cuts a figure of a successful businessman and his tone during the interview was proud and assertive. He continued:

In 2008 my fellow kessoch and I organized the council of priests of Ethiopian Jews. We sought to establish an organization in order to develop and integrate our culture. If we are to take the path of politics, one person cannot exert the same influence as an organization. And we have achieved quite a lot. We also have an internet site. We wish to preserve our mentality and our prayers unchanged in the State of Israel. We have received national recognition of our sigd festive day, on which the Jews of Ethiopia pray for Jerusalem and the people of Israel. We wish to open a seminary for kessoch, to force the state to recognize our status. If we remain silent, they won't recognize us. I say there are things that we should learn, but you should also learn what we know, the religious laws of the kessoch. To gain recognition for thirteen kessoch, we fought with the Ministry of Religion, the Prime Minister's Office, went on a demonstration, and we corresponded with the establishment. So they had to grant us some recognition.

While endorsing the role of the kessoch, Waba challenges the leadership of the chief rabbi of Ethiopian immigrants in Israel appointed by Israel's Chief Rabbinate. He is in charge of the national marriage registry of Ethiopian immigrant couples, in which capacity he examines the couple's Judaism. This arouses considerable resentment among Ethiopian immigrants in general and kessoch in particular. This tension manifests itself in his criticism of the rabbi and merges with the sense of humiliation generated by the demand to convert to Judaism. It appears that beneath the veneer of a dispute over religious issues lies a latent power struggle with the person appointed by the establishment. Kess Waba continued:

On the one hand they give Rabbi Yosef a pistol with which to kill us, and on the other, he is an Ethiopian. We tell him: 'You won't be the Chief Rabbi without our support.' We say that the kessoch know who is or is not a Jew, let's sit together and draw up the lists.

When asked how he defines himself, Waba replies:

I am a bit of everything, sort of in the middle. I prefer the Israeli side because I came to be part of the State of Israel. My kids are Israelis. I have a splendid synagogue. On the other hand, I am an Ethiopian Jew regarding food, prayer, and study. As to my dress, I keep the white robe of the kess in the car. I wear a suit, a tie, and the white tarbush on my head. At home I put on a skullcap... Here everything revolves around your looks, status and money... There are proper working clothes for every occasion. I wear the dress of Israelis in government offices, and I feel comfortable with that.

Kess Waba speaks with assurance, clearly aware of his stature (the son of a kess, powerful and successful) and influence. He is active in politics, charismatic, and has successfully integrated into Israel's social fabric. We were impressed primarily by his

political fervor, and less by his religious positions. He is one of the community leaders who managed to increase visibility of Ethiopian Jews for other Israelis. Kess Waba is a politician proud of his achievements: recognition of 13 new *kessoch*; turning the *sigd* festivity into a national event; his continuous struggle against the religious establishment represented by Ethiopian chief rabbi. He understands the local political playfield rather well and selects identities according to his current needs. In this manner, Kess Waba builds his cadre of supporters, emerging as an alternative to the formal religious leadership. His eventual certification to engage in ritual slaughter after prolonged struggle has enabled him to develop a prosperous business, and he is duly proud of his prosperity and material assets.

The rabbis

“I don’t feel at ease being in the middle, not having a status”

Forty years old, Moshe immigrated at the age of twelve. He studied at a religious boarding school and served in the air-force. He serves as a rabbi in the religious council of a city in central Israel, and he received us in his modest shared office. Moshe said:

I never thought about being a rabbi, but in the army I became religious. When I was released, I went to a seminary run by SHAS [Mizrahi ultra-orthodox movement] and now regard myself as belonging to the SHAS party... It pains me that there isn’t one case of marriage between Ethiopians and the SHAS people. According to Ovadia Yosef [SHAS chief rabbi], we are proper Jews, but some of his close aids disagree and keep silent. The problem is not just with marriage, but also with SHAS’ educational institutions. When someone wishes to enroll an Ethiopian child, they ask if he has undergone conversion.

How do I live with this? This is blatant discrimination. We are discriminated in every country. I encountered this in SHAS, in the government, in the army. I believe that times will change. Nowadays even the Ashkenazi rabbis are more accommodating to us, since more Ethiopians accept their regulations and there are also Ethiopian rabbis, so there has been some change for the better.

I am an Ethiopian but also an Israeli. Our ethnic group is no different to other groups in Israel, they are Jews like all the rest. Whatever a Jew from Morocco knows, I know too. His halakha is also mine. The problem is the Diaspora and what it has done. There were thousands of years of disconnection; the problem was the distance from the Jewish people... I respect the old kessoch: they are not to blame for being unfamiliar with the halakha as we are, but what they knew they preserved well. As for the young kessoch, the religious establishment does not recognize them because many do not accept the halakha. When they say they wish to preserve their tradition unchanged, they are making a mistake. On the other hand, if the religious establishment were to recognize new kessoch, they would compete with us. As soon as a political struggle begins, all the gates are breached... The fact that I can serve as a rabbi only in the Ethiopian community is clearly discriminatory. I cannot compete for the position of a city rabbi, I cannot even be a regular rabbi.

Moshe's narrative reveals his inner turmoil: his mind is engrossed in religious study and his heart is with his heritage. Because it, he dare not find fault with the old *kessoch*, but does criticize the young *kessoch* for rejecting the mainstream religious laws. Since he belongs to SHAS and appreciates Rabbi Ovadia Yosef's recognition of his community's Jewishness, he refrains from openly criticizing him. Yet he does criticize the educational system and some other SHAS leaders. As a member of the religious council, he does not permit himself to criticize the movement that nourishes him, but is prepared to comment on the manner in which the rabbis treat his ethnic group; his words express apology and self-justification. Moshe is ambivalent with regard to his personal position within the rabbinical establishment: he became a recognized rabbi, but he also feels like a second-rate one. He also feels alienation from his co-ethnics: the elders of his community regard him as someone "who has crossed over to the other side" and neglects his heritage. He perceives himself to be Israeli because he served in the army. Yet his subordinate place in the system does not enable him to feel a full-fledged Israeli Jew who can claim equal rights within the system. His words also indicate status anxiety in light of the possible recognition of the young *kessoch* and confrontation with them over community leadership.

"I am a rabbi and my brother is a kess, and we don't see eye to eye"

Our next informant (anonymous - A) immigrated to Israel with his family at the age of 14 and is now forty years old. The interview was conducted in the community synagogue located in a schoolyard. He is welcoming and apart from his skin color resembles a young orthodox rabbi, wearing a black skullcap and sporting a short beard. He studied at a seminary of the national religious movement. A recounted his story:

I came to the religious council with a rabbi's certificate, and the head of the council wore a knitted skullcap, as I did. When he was replaced by a SHAS man, I told myself that I had to adjust since I have a family and need to keep this job; so I changed my skullcap to a black one. My father was very devoted to the land of Israel and attempted to bridge the gaps between Ethiopians and other Jews. When he passed away, my brother crossed to the other side. He opposes the ritual slaughter of the rabbinate and goes along with the kessoch tradition.

I am an Israeli; I eat kosher food, at work I connect with other Ethiopians. When someone passes away I participate in the funeral, and I also officiate at weddings. But I don't eat their food, and then they say to me, you don't belong to us. I myself slaughter, and serve as a personal example that one should eat only meat slaughtered according to the halakha. At my mother's I have my own pot and food. I don't eat at other people's homes. My older brother should have followed my father's path, but he didn't persist and went along with the kessoch. He slaughters for our mother, according to the custom of the kessoch. There are things about which we disagree. My mother is unhappy about the conflict and reconciles us. We pray together in the synagogue, when my brother leads the prayers in Amharic for the older people, and I lead it in Hebrew for the young people.

So I stand between two worlds: as part of the rabbinate, I want to influence and persuade them to accept my ethnic group. On the other hand, I try to persuade our kin not to lose hope for being accepted. I was

ordained as a rabbi fifteen years ago. Any Israeli [non-black] rabbi ordained only a few years ago has more authority than me. They won't give me a proper office; they prevent me from having authority in different ways.

While A declares that he drifts between the two worlds, he points accusingly at the religious establishment that has trained him but also discriminates against him. He clearly exhibits bitterness toward his patrons. He criticizes the behavior of the community's chief rabbi, who sets the tone, and other SHAS "politicians" who influence the scene via their economic weight and links to the national-level politicians. Like other young rabbis we interviewed, he too expresses anxiety about the *kessoch's* organization.

"I am both universal and particular"

We met with Menachem in the lobby of the university library. He wore black trousers, a white shirt and the fringed garment of orthodox Jews. He is 37 years old, friendly and well-spoken, exhibits knowledge of Jewish sources and likes to quote: "When I quote someone it means I identify with him." He laces his speech with Yiddish idioms and is very knowledgeable about Ethiopian tradition. He is studying for a doctorate in philosophy and teaches basic courses in Judaic studies. He chose an Israeli surname. This is what Menachem told us:

I immigrated via Sudan in 1982 at the age of eight, without my parents, who followed later. I studied in a boarding school belonging to the national religious movement. Although I never drink, when I came to Israel, I felt like a 'drunk': I didn't absorb what was happening around me. I lived in an incomprehensible, unfamiliar world, 'the unified world' in Spinoza's terms. That harms your self-assurance. I was on the seam between heteronomy – outside forces that play on you, and autonomy – that is your own powers. Between these two worlds, the inner and the outer, you try to negate your self in order to blend in your new surroundings, not be in conflict with them. This is a high price to pay, that's what I think now. You are either swallowed up or try to preserve your identity, and live with this constant dilemma. At the time I did not comprehend how much I had assimilated: I was pulled along, attracted to new things, everything appeared good to me. They are all white here, and whatever comes out of the white world is holy. When you have no autonomy you live in a state of drunkenness. I guess I lost the sense of reality and thought I would be like everyone else. You want to belong to the place. The Israeli is white; he is the local who we sought to emulate.

When my parents arrived I was still in a state of delusion, which continued well into my service at the hesder seminary [a seminary that combines religious study with military service]. Serving as an officer in the army, I became Israeli; after the service I returned to the seminary. I immersed myself in the world of religion wishing to integrate into my new milieu; there you also lose your autonomous, particular element. When did I begin to understand this? It's a very prolonged process. At what particular point did the penny drop – that I can't say, but I am different now.

What it means to be an Israeli? To me, an Israeli is something very complex. Israeli means the fathers of religious Zionism who came here to drain the swamps. The Holocaust survivors who joined the army; they are a role model for me. However, I shall never deprecate my own personality in the presence of a great man [meaning a great rabbi], as it often happens among SHAS members. I cannot deprecate myself before any great man. They said to Newton, you are a genius; he replied, I am a dwarf sitting atop of geniuses, so I see ahead better than them.

This world is extremely dichotomous but I try to live dialectically being both Israeli and Ethiopian. When you set out on a journey you learn much about yourself. But there may be a danger that you return home and no-one will recognize you. On the other hand, if you shut yourself away there is a problem, since you can develop your identity only through contact with others. There is no definitive moment in the transformation that occurred in me. It happens suddenly and is something between you and the Holy God. I am very universal and very particular. I am the rabbi of an Ashkenazi synagogue in Kiryat Gat. They accept me because I accept myself.

One must speak before one yells. That is precisely the root of misunderstanding between the rabbinate and the kessoch in the affair of strict conversion. One must understand that there is the halakha and one cannot get around it. Were our rabbi Moses alive these days, he too would be required to undergo a strict conversion. He would say, the kessoch are closer to me than the ultra-orthodox Jews. Because the kessoch are closer to the Bible, to the revelation of Mount Sinai.

The Ethiopian tradition and the halakha do not always agree. Unfortunately, there is no dialogue between the two. Israelis may be friendly, but there is a clear hierarchy. That is so frustrating to some really great minds among the kessoch. That's a community that was a model for us in Ethiopia. There Christians and Moslems would come to learn from the Jews. That is a drastic transition, from being a respected leader to losing your status and becoming nobody. There was a misunderstanding and a sort of disrespect... According to Ethiopian halakha I must obey the kess. But there is a problem with the ritual slaughter [his expression is pained]. Had there been a true dialogue, they would have resolved all the issues in a respectful manner. Had there been more respect, the kessoch would have been willing to compromise with the rabbinate, to study halakha and adopt proper procedures. There are kessoch who have studied this and I have eaten in their homes.

Rabbi Menahem is young, erudite and broad-minded. On the one hand, he is very Israeli in his outward presentation, his clothes and manner of speaking, but on the other - delicately "Ethiopian" in the wise and subdued way he expresses himself. Using the language of philosophy, he shares with us the process of "disillusionment" whereby he shed the sense of "drunkenness" that suffused him since arriving in Israel, and his attempts to combine social integration with preserving his true identity. His example shows that the process of identity change is complex, protracted, and may have no clear turning points. He also illustrates the inherent conflict between the

community-based traditions and the established norms of the Israeli rabbinical power holders.

Concluding remarks

The article explores the place of young Ethiopian leaders belonging to the 1.5 generation in Israel's social tapestry, particularly in the world of spiritual and religious practices. As expected, we found clear variance between the two kinds of young leaders. While the rabbis tended to assimilate within the rabbinical establishment they serve, the *kessoch* exhibited patterns of resistance toward this establishment which usually excludes them.

Departing from the theoretical outline of the 1.5 generation (Lev Ari, 2010; Remennick, 2003), we discovered a range of behaviors posed between assimilation and resistance, each group acting according to its background and current place in the Israeli society. Yet, the two groups (rabbis and *kessoch*) did not exhibit clear-cut patterns of attitudes and responses to established Israeli religious norms. To refine our explanation of the observed similarities and differences between the two groups, we turned to the syncretism model. The basic concept of syncretism denotes the amalgamation of various religious and cultural elements to create a new tradition (Sharaby, 2002: 17-22; Leopold and Jensen, 2004). The syncretic process involves the processing, interpretation and adaptation of traditional symbols and customs to the new culture, accompanied by the adoption of foreign elements. It occurs within a minority group as new variations of tradition and modernity evolve (Shils, 1981: 240-246). This is often a strategy employed by a minority in order to adapt and/or to access the mainstream.

We found that the young *kessoch* utilize various forms of "ongoing resistance" (Scott, 1990; Kaplan, 1997) alongside varying degrees of syncretism. The *kessoch* who are not recognized by the establishment clearly expressed a sense of powerlessness, augmented by their compromised economic and family situation. Others expressed frustration with their condition, opposing it via the strict maintenance of traditional religious precepts. Some demonstrated a clear pattern of syncretism, manifesting integration in the white-majority society by virtue of their education and political involvement, alongside fervent preservation of elements of their culture. Many *kessoch* made intelligent use of their knowledge of the values and norms of the new society, utilizing these to create a fresh alternative on their way toward the influential social and cultural center. Yet a clear majority of young Ethiopian leaders are prone to contention and resistance, in line with the experiences of other members of the 1.5 generation in Israel (Remennick, 2003).

By contrast, the rabbis in our study represented estrangement both from their original community and from the official religious establishment. Their self-perception as proper Jews is at odds with the stance of the Israeli rabbinate refusing to recognize fully the Jewishness of the Ethiopian immigrants. This rejection (tacit or explicit) contributes to the construction of their fragile and ambivalent identity. Rather paradoxically, they appear to interpret and transmit the official *halakhic* discourse to their community, but are omitted from this very discourse at the level of rabbinical authorities. By admitting ordained Ethiopian rabbis to the minor positions in municipal religious bodies, the religious establishment is able to proclaim that there is no discrimination against the Ethiopians, whereas in fact it is loath to recognize their kosher Jewishness.

Living on the seam line, the rabbis belong neither here nor there. Describing the phenomenon of nationalism in Jaffa, Hazan and Monterescu (2011) write: "The stranger is not the enemy but rather the subject that populates the liminal area between the familiar and the ultimate other, in which the categories of otherness and familiarity collapse to leave only foreignness" (Ibid.: 26). We came across a similar state of affairs among the Ethiopian rabbis. Their most conspicuous behavioral trait is their effort to shed their otherness and merge with the absorbing society in order to resolve their identity conflict.

One may also discern syncretic (or hybrid) features in the rabbis' narratives. Thus, the location of their "offices" symbolizes their marginal position within the establishment. We found many signs of animosity between the rabbis and the young *kessoch* over sources of influence in the community. This confrontation is fueled not merely by political interest (the union of Ethiopian rabbis versus the association of young *kessoch*), but also by the differential attitude toward them on the part of the establishment. Thus, chief Ethiopian rabbi clearly attempted to placate the young *kessoch* (who are waging a campaign to undermine his legitimacy within the community) by offering them a study course followed by the status of community "kess-rabbi," on a par with the status of the young Ethiopian rabbi. It appeared to us that the young *kessoch* were prevailing in this confrontation, at least in terms of their social and community acceptance, if only because they are regarded as more connected to their cultural roots. By contrast, the Ethiopian rabbis are perceived as having "crossed over to the other side," but also feel like strangers and lack authority within the organization that embraced them. The Ethiopian Chief Rabbi succinctly summarized the distress felt by all parties: "The condescension on the part of the religious establishment and the lack of respect shown to the *kessoch* are the root of the evil. Had there been respect for our ethnic group, no party would have become entrenched in their extreme positions." Future will show how the emerging conflict between the formal and informal religious leadership will be solved, but the solution will definitely be shaped by the preferences of the younger members of the Ethiopian community.

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