From *Shelilat ha-Galut* to *Shelilat ha-Geulah* in Narratives of Moroccan and Ethiopian Origin

by Emanuela Trevisan Semi

Abstract

This paper analyzes how the Zionist discourse on shelilat ha-galut *– "the denial of the diaspora," or rejection of the image of the exilic Jew, which also implies removal from the culture of the country of birth in the diaspora – is prominent in Hebrew literary works. Whereas this discourse remains very complex in Ashkenazi writers, we can identify even greater challenges and disparities in the output of writers of Moroccan and Ethiopian origin who left the countries of their birth and in whose work "at home" seems to be the very country of exile. In these writers, we find a self-distancing from Israeli reality and from identifying with the "Israelis." This is a reversal of the exile-vs.-redemption discourse, with* Eretz Israel *now as the country of exile and the country the writer has abandoned, previously deemed the land of exile, as the homeland. These writers have left a homeland, a supposed land of exile, only to arrive in a promised homeland which becomes even more of a land of exile, and makes them yearn for their former exile. In this article I will restrict myself to analyzing* Avne shaish tahor [Stones of Pure Marble] *by Herzl Cohen,* Asterai *by Omri Tegamlak Avera and* Ha-derekh li-Yrushalaim: reshit ha-ʿaliyah me-Etyopyah u-qelitatah (1980) [The Road to Jerusalem: The Beginnings of the Aliyah from Ethiopia and Its Absorption (1980)] *by Yilma Shemuel.*

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Introduction

Denial of the diaspora, *shelilat ha-galut*,[1] or rejection of the image of the exilic Jew, *ha-yehudi ha-galuti*, which also implies removal from and rejection of the culture of the country of birth in the diaspora, a place of alienation, is a well-known form of political discourse typical of Zionist thought; the approach has been less prominent in literary works. It is thanks to the recent work of Yohai Oppenheimer that the ambivalence of the rejection of the diaspora in literary discourse has been brought to the fore.[2] The discussion focuses on the work of poets and writers of the first '*aliyah*, who were caught between the ideas of *galut* and *geulah*, between exile (the country of birth) and redemption (*Eretz Israel*). Contrast and ambivalence are rife in early twentieth-century Ashkenazi poets and writers such as Shaul Tchernikowski, Haim Nahman Bialik, Yosef Brenner, Leah Goldberg and Natan Alterman, as well as in the post-war period, namely, in Avot Yeshurun and Aharon Appelfeld, according to Oppenheimer's analysis. Among the Mizrahim, Erez Biton, a poet of Moroccan origin, begins to convey a sense of great distance from the Israeli world, which was supposed to have become the new space of re-territorialization of the Jewish imagination. Biton is the first to have taken a clear stance against the erasing of the past and to have opposed Zionist ideological discourse, by imbuing his poetic writing with memories of the past.[3] In the words of Biton (my translation):

> I learned very quickly to reject the Arab in my mother, my grandmother, my aunts and my uncles; I hated whatever members of the family recounted of the great times in Morocco. The child in me was convinced that they were all lies invented by the family to defend themselves from what they felt to be insults coming from the Ashkenazim, whom they in turn never ceased to revile. Later I began to hate their songs and to believe that we ourselves were not Jews and, above all, not real Israelis. I was studying in a class of 40 Mizrahim with a female Ashkenazi teacher of good intentions, but I never heard even the slightest allusion to the Jews of North Africa, Persia, Turkey or the Indies. Conversely, at home my father never stopped recounting and languishing in nostalgia. Today I thank him for his stories, which have deeply rooted themselves in my memory; he has saved my soul from spiritual destruction. In this way, the

[1] *Galut* or *golah* can denote "exile" as well as "emigration" or "diaspora."

[2] Yohai Oppenheimer, *Zikhron ha-galut ba-sifrut ha-'ivrit [Remembering the Diaspora in Hebrew Literature],* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 2015).

[3] *Ibid.*, 310.

> State has succeeded in muddling my identity and in implanting deep down in me the terrible feeling that I hailed from an empty place, a place that was a *tabula rasa*, as if I came from the moon.[4]

In contrast to the first-generation Mizrahi writers such as Shimon Ballas, Sami Mikael and Eli Amir, Erez Biton avoids introducing into his poetry significant identity links to Israeli reality, voicing instead his nostalgia for the Moroccan landscape of his youth. Oppenheimer reminds us that Zionist redemption is not a response to metaphysical exile, which is a condition of the spirit and can persist even if bodily exile is over. This becomes all the more true if we consider that after the destruction of the Second Temple, exile became a space of narration, as the Bible, the Talmud, and by extension all Jewish text developed into an identity space for Jews, replacing the territorial-geographical space which the Jews had lost. Hence, with exile as narration, it was not easy to re-territorialize it in *Eretz Israel*. This is particularly true of the *Shoah*, which was expected to lead European exile from an imagined Home to a real Home, as Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi explains:

> The Holocaust may have turned European exile from a place in which Home is imagined into a 'real' home that can only be recalled from somewhere and reconstructed from its shards: retrospectively, that is, the destruction seems to have territorialized exile as a lost home.[5]

In other words, we will find in post-Shoah writers a different attitude as compared to those who wrote before the Shoah because imagining and relating to the country of origin or exile after the devastation becomes more difficult, since the land is thought of as forever lost. Yet here, too, there are differences. It is enough to think of the feelings expressed by Avot Yeshurun, writing after the Shoah about the condition of unending exile: "For 2000 years have I waited for Tel Aviv from Krasnistaw, for 2000 [years] have I waited for Krasnistaw from Tel Aviv."[6] Hence, in secular Tel Aviv (not in Zion), a new exile has begun. This concept returns us to the condition of being Jewish as "being elsewhere combined with the desperate wish to 'be at home.'"[7]

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[4] *Ibid.*, 309.

[5] Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *Booking Passage. Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination*, (Berkeley – Los Angeles – London: University of California Press, 2000), 17.

[6] Oppenheimer, *Zikhron*, 254.

[7] DeKoven Ezrahi, *Booking Passage*, 231.

Thus, while the discourse on *shelilat ha-galut* in Ashkenazi writers remains very complex, we can identify even greater challenges and disparities in the output of writers of Moroccan and Ethiopian origin who left the countries of their birth and in whose work "at home" seems to be the very country of exile.

The Narrative of Israelis from Morocco and Ethiopia: Different Feelings

To highlight the difference between the feelings that we find expressed in Israeli writers from Morocco and Ethiopia and the Ashkenazim, I appeal to the poet Uri Zvi Grinberg, who shows the ambivalence he feels towards Galicia, the land of his birth, which he has left behind. Grinberg writes: "We are obliged to hate even if we have loved."[8] For Ben Gurion, this being forced to hate also becomes an obligation to forget. In 1950, Ben Gurion proclaimed to the Knesset that the aim of Israel's government was to have the recently arrived Yemenis forget Yemen "as I have forgotten that I am Polish."[9] With Ben Gurion we move to the politicization of forgetting, an ideology which was being translated into policies aiming to enforce oblivion. Ben Gurion had chosen to forget about being Polish and wanted to impose oblivion on those not sharing the same sentiments, in this instance the Yemenis, and more generally on all Jews who had departed Arab Muslim countries. This would mean, for the Yemenis and for the other Jews who would become the Mizrahim we know today, renouncing all memory of their countries of origin and of Arab culture, and without finding any signpost to their past in their new country, since their new State had been built along European lines. Ben Gurion could well claim to have forgotten Poland, but Poland was in fact incorporated by Ben Gurion as part of the Westernization of the new State insofar as Eastern European culture became the foundation upon which the State was constructed, unlike the culture of Arab countries.

This feeling of total oblivion or hate of the country abandoned and which previously had been loved is precisely what cannot be detected in the output of writers originally hailing from Morocco or Ethiopia, of whatever generation after immigration.

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[8] Oppenheimer, *Zikhron*, 164.

[9] Tudor Parfitt, *The Road to Redemption. The Jews of Yemen 1900-1950*, (Leiden – New York – Koln: Brill, 1996), 234, n. 24.

A Jewish woman originally from Morocco who emigrated to Argentina states:

> It's the only country [of origin, Morocco] with which those who emigrated still keep affective bonds, still feel like visiting, still have nostalgia, while [those from] other countries have set up a wall, they don't want to even set foot in Germany, Poland, nor tell their story... and it gets lost, you know, that history gets lost?[10]

These are sentiments to be found not only among Moroccan Jews, but also in recent writing by Jews from Ethiopia now settled in Israel. Indeed, in the accounts of Ethiopian Jews, feelings of nostalgia for the country of origin are expressed in a fashion similar to what we find in authors of Moroccan origin – nostalgia for the country's beauty, its cultural and religious traditions and, above all, the desire to recount the history of the country left behind. Often it is a matter of the Jewish history of the country one has abandoned and therefore the history of "a sort of homeland in the nation," to use a phrase from an interview conducted by Michèle Baussant among Jews originally from Egypt.[11] Here reference is made to a feeling of belonging to a country, a feeling shared by the community as well as by the country the Jews have left. In the final analysis, it is a vision which coincides neither with the history of the country abandoned nor with the official version of history as recounted in Israeli public discourse.

These writers enable us to listen to "their story" and "their stories," hence contributing to the formation of a more nuanced collective memory which prioritizes the distinguishing features both of the country of belonging and of the one abandoned.

In these writers, we find a certain self-distancing from Israeli reality and from identifying with the "Israelis." This is a reversal of the exile-vs.-redemption discourse, with *Eretz Israel* now as the country of exile and the country the writer has abandoned, previously deemed the land of exile, as the homeland. This is the discourse of *shelilat ha-geulah*, negation of redemption (or of the country of redemption), by contrast with *shelilat ha-galut*. These writers have left a homeland, a supposed land of exile, only to arrive in a promised homeland which becomes even more of a land of exile, and makes them yearn for their former

[10] Angy Cohen, Aviad Moreno, "Revisiting Morocco from Israel and Argentina. Contrasting Narratives about the 'Trip Back' among Jewish Immigrants from Northern Morocco," *Journal of Jewish identities* 10/2 (2017): 173-197, 192.

[11] Michèle Baussant, "*Aslak eh*? De juif en Egypte à juif d'Egypte," *Diasporas* 27 (2016): 77-93, 92.

exile. Oppenheimer explains this as the refusal to adopt Israel as an alternative homeland "since this homeland does not awaken feelings of home – *bayit* – in the Mizrahim, feelings which were, by contrast, associated with the world they have abandoned."[12] Writing to recover a history of a past erased – or to claim a history different from what makes up public discourse – with the aim of rehabilitating one's country of origin, is a discourse shared by both Moroccan and Ethiopian writers, though fewer accounts have been composed by Ethiopians, whose emigration is more recent. On reading the authors belonging to these two communities – the Moroccan-Israeli and the Ethiopian-Israeli – the similarity of images, feelings, content and goals is striking.

There are a number of Moroccan-Israeli authors who belong to this category: Shelomo Elbaz, Gabriel Bensimhon, Avi Bouganim, Uziel Hazan, Sami Berdugo, Herzl Cohen and Dalia Carlibach Danan, among others.[13] Among Ethiopian-Israeli authors are: Asher Elias, Gadi Yevarken, Asfu Beru, Omri Tegamlak Avera and Yilma Shemuel.[14]

In this article I will restrict myself to analyzing *Avne shaish tahor*[15] [*Stones of Pure Marble*] by Herzl Cohen, *Astarai*[16] by Omri Tegamlak Avera and *Ha-derekh li-Yrushalaim*: *reshit ha-'aliyah me-Etyopyah u-qelitatah (1980)* [*The Road to Jerusalem: The Beginnings of the Aliyah from Ethiopia and Its Absorption (1980)*] by Yilma Shemuel.[17] Of these three tales, only Cohen's can be considered a novel. All three were published in the late 1990s or the first decade of the new millennium and each is its author's first published work. Herzl Cohen belongs to the second generation, and Tegamlak Avewra and Yilma Shemuel to the "one-and-a-half" (they left Ethiopia as children or adolescents).

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[12] *Ibid.*

[13] Shelomo Elbaz, Gabriel Bensimhon, Avi Bouganim, Uziel Hazan, Sami Berdugo, Herzl Cohen, Dalia Carlibach Danan. On the work of these authors, see Emanuela Trevisan Semi, "Rethinking Morocco. Life-writing of Jews from Morocco," *Hespéris-Tamuda*, 51/3, II part, (2016): 141-164; Id., "Life-writing between Israel, the Diaspora and Morocco. Revisiting the Homeland through Locations and Objects of Identity," in *Contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi Literature*, ed. Dario Miccoli, (London – New York: Routledge, 2017), 84-97.

[14] For a presentation of the work of these authors see Adia Mendelson-Maoz, *Multiculturalism in Israel. Literary Perspectives*, (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2014).

[15] Herzl Cohen, *Avne shaish tahor*, (Tel Aviv: Am 'oved, 2004).

[16] Omri Tegamlak Avera, *Astarai*, (Tel Aviv: Yedi'ot Aharonot – Sifre Hemed Books, 2008).

[17] Yilma Shemuel, *Ha-derekh li-Yrushalaim. Reshit ha-'aliyah me-Etyopyah u-qelitatah (1980)*, (Tel Aviv: Hotzaat sefarim reshafim, 1995).

Moroccan-Israeli Writers

Orit Ouaknine-Yekutieli and Yigal Salaom Nizri open their article on the Moroccan diaspora in Israel with the answer which Mishael, the main character in Herzl Cohen's novel, gives his Moroccan lover when she asks:

> Tell me, ya Sidi, what did they take, the Jews, what did they seize from their hosts?
> [...] Everything, ya Lalla; they grabbed it all, whatever was there... They took the melodies, with their tastes, hues and sub-hues, and they took the food, and they adopted the language, with its depths, its hints and secrets...they took with them curses and bans, smiles and greetings, images and colors, the sun and the sky, the heat and the cold.[18]

This passage from Herzl Cohen's novel takes us to the heart of the matter, clearly conveying the ambiguity which surrounds issues of identity in Jewish Moroccan culture. This also helps shed light on what a female painter, who had left Morocco at the age of five, said in an interview to the author of the present article:

> In 1990, I held [in Israel] an exhibition of my paintings [on the customs of Moroccan Jews] and a representative of the Moroccan government came... And he said, "That's Moroccan and that's Moroccan," and I said "What are you saying to me?". Personally, I thought I was doing paintings on Moroccan Judaism and now you're telling me that everything is Moroccan, Islamic... That for me was a great revelation, meaning that...for sure there was some influence... I think that deep down the Jews have borrowed a lot, an awful lot of their traditions from the Muslims. The children's little dinner held for Easter, the bread rolls which we made during Easter week, the children cooking, we gave them things, vegetables, everything, and he told me that for Muslims it's the same thing, what they call the feast of herbs, which they hold in the spring... when a boy is born, we draw a line on the wall with a knife to ward off *shedim* [evil spirits], so that they stop there, and they do that too, but to me it was Jewish....[19]

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[18] Orit Ouaknine-Yekutieli, Yigal Shalom Nizri, "My Heart Is in the Maghrib: Aspects of Cultural Revival of the Moroccan Diaspora in Israel," *Hespéris-Tamuda* 51/3 (2016), II Part,: 165-192, 165.

[19] Interview conducted in Israel in 2008; see Emanuela Trevisan Semi, "Entre le contexte oublié

The passage demonstrates how Zionist discourse negating the diaspora (*shelilat ha-galut*) and the ideology and policies based on this denial have erased the socio-cultural context of origin for Moroccan Jews and support their feeling of having grown up in a void and of coming from a place which was a *tabula rasa*. Immigrants who arrived as children, such as the female painter (or Erez Biton or Omri Tegamlak Avera), have grown up nurtured by a discourse that not only denied the *galut*, a concept in which all diasporas are muddled and lumped together, but denied with even greater vehemence any diaspora from Arab countries, whose culture and language became objects of contempt. It is thanks to the intervention of the Moroccan state representative that the woman painter first begins to question the official discourse and to distance herself from it.

With the doubting of the official mode of discourse, the problematization of Arab-Muslim influence on their identity for Moroccan-Israeli authors, or the Ethiopian, Christian or Muslim influence for Ethiopian-Israeli writers, acquires greater importance and becomes something shared. We find the same sharing and promoting of the identity question in the three tales where being Moroccan and being Ethiopian become distinctive features.

Herzl Cohen's novel opens with the burial of his father in Israel, followed by traditional *shiv'ah* (week of mourning), which the protagonist, Mishael, the son who has cast off his *kippah* (thus signaling his rejection of religious tradition) tries to dodge. His mother speaks in Arabic and there is neither a translation within the text nor in a note; the message is clear: the reader is being inducted into the Arab-Moroccan context and will need quickly to become familiar with it. We immediately learn of another *shiv'ah* being observed in Morocco, in the little village of Kharibga, by the rabbi who was once a neighbor of the protagonist's mother. This *shiv'ah* is supposed to sever all ties with the rabbi's daughter, whom he has pronounced dead because she had "gone with the demon" shortly before the family's departure for Israel. The story of the rabbi's daughter, driven out and abandoned, is at the root of the protagonist's trip to Morocco with his family before the death of his father. The journey is purportedly a pilgrimage to family tombs, but in reality, its aim is to find the little girl, now a grown woman, who seems to be only waiting for the return of

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et l'hégémonisation du 'Fait juif.' Quelques réflexions à partir du narratif sioniste," in *Socio-anthropologie des judaismes contemporaines*, ed. Chantal Bordes Benayoun, (Paris: Honoré Champion 2015), 101-109, 103.

our hero to his homeland, as in the best of literary traditions. From the beginning, the name of the hometown of the family appears, Kharibga (Khurigba, Khriga), a town of the Mid-Atlas, and we are introduced to the practices of Moroccan Jews. In the first part of the novel, the protagonist denounces the hate towards Arabs which has become a part of the discourse of his Moroccan-Israeli milieu, a discourse which denies the evidence of the Moroccan Jews' belonging to Arab culture: "What will remain of you if you remove the Arab part of yourself, for it is in Arabic that your mother dreamed..."[20]

The protagonist denounces the inconsistency of being imbued with this culture and at the same time hating it: "I set about attacking the hate of those Jews now sitting in my mother's home, devoutly chanting and singing psalms and *mishanyot* in Hebrew, all to an Arab melody, obviously."[21] These same Jews intone Arab melodies for *Simhat Torah* – and then go into the streets shouting, "Death to the Arabs!"[22] "These melodies that you love, the poets that you love, the singers that you love, the composers and the musicians, they're all Arabs, more or less pious Muslims... and every nook, every corner is bathed in their Arabism..."[23] Herzl Cohen appears to be suggesting that Uri Zvi Grinberg, according to whom one is obliged to hate what one has loved, has won unknowing converts among Moroccan Jews.

The second part of the book (138 pages), nearly two-thirds of the novel, is entitled "The Journey" and deals with the trip to Morocco. On the one hand, this recalls the Moroccan Jewish tradition of making a pilgrimage by returning to Morocco to accomplish a rite of passage: visiting former homes, parents' graves and the tombs of saints. Yet on the other hand, this is a journey that must loop the loop: find the rabbi's daughter who was driven out because of a relationship with a non-Jew and made to emigrate to Israel. Mishael falls in love with Nadia, the rabbi's granddaughter who has become a dancer, and takes her with him to Israel. Mishael will find himself "between the breasts of the Moroccan woman, Arab Jew and Jewish Arab,"[24] a woman with a composite, hyphenated identity, with whom he will discover the Arab element of his own repudiated, hidden,

[20] Cohen, *Avne shaish tahor*, 32. [Here and henceforth quoted passages are translated by the author of this article].
[21] *Ibid.*, 30.
[22] *Ibid.*, 33.
[23] *Ibid.*, 31.
[24] *Ibid.*, 18.

forgotten identity and display it overtly in Israel. With this young girl who is both Arab and Jewish, he will recover the scattered pieces of his identity and fit them back together as in a puzzle. Talking to Nadia, the main character admits his surprise at not feeling any strangeness about this and says: "In fact, did I not grow up with the language of my mother; were the songs of her mother not also the songs of my own mother; was the taste of her food not the same as the food of my own home?"[25] The part which takes place in Morocco is a sort of coming-of-age journey where the protagonist, on seeing his parents in context, comes to understand behavior, opinions and ways of being which previously he had found unintelligible. It is as if he succeeds in re-positioning them in their context, and by doing so, he, too, finds the missing parts of his lost identity.

Ethiopian-Israeli Writers

In *Asterai*, the author plunges us into Ethiopia from the very outset. We find ourselves submerged in words in Amharic, vocalized but not translated nor listed in a glossary, with a short glossary only being added in the French translation.[26] We need to reach the third part of the book to find a shift to *Eretz ha-avot* [land of the fathers], the term used for Israel, but it is a matter of roughly 60 pages out of 284. The final part again centers on Ethiopia, focusing on the history of the Beta Israel and thus on the Ethiopia of Ethiopian Jews, "this sort of homeland in the nation" as quoted above. This is a tale which blends various genres, part novel, part autobiography, part history, moving from fictional narrative to documentary and back.

The work opens with the story of Fetgu, a child whose father tells him that he has now become old enough to shepherd the flock on his own. The child shows himself to be brave, innocent and wise, destined to become a charismatic leader of his community. His grandmother, endowed with magic powers, entrusts him with part of these in view of the journey she knows the family will make to *Yirussalem* (the pronunciation of "Jerusalem" in Amharic). To do this, she introduces him to the magic bird Asterai, a swan, the word for which gives the novel its title; the bird takes away the sins of the community on the "Asterai fast," the fast of *Yom Kippur*. The bird also brings good tidings from Jerusalem and later asks the child to take grains of corn from Ethiopia to Israel to complete

[25] *Ibid.*, 158.

[26] Omri Tegamalak Avera, *Asterai*, transl. Rosie Pinhas-Delpuech, (Paris: Actes sud, 2009).

a cycle which had begun with the family's ancestors, who had brought grains of corn to Ethiopia with them when they first came from Jerusalem. The role of the migratory bird, a symbol of freedom and movement, recalls the bird image in Bialik, which forms a link between the diaspora and Eretz Israel. However, in *Asterai* the bird "died of grief, having seen what the people of Beta Israel went through in Sudan and the Holy Land."[27] The bird image, embodying nostalgia for Jerusalem, is common in folklore and in the Ethiopian Jewish tradition.

Shalva Weil recalls an ancient folk tale of the Beta Israel about a stork. This was set to music by Shlomo Gronich, an Israeli pop and rock musician, and begins in this way:

> Oh stork, oh stork,
> How is our city of Jerusalem?
> The stork flies to the Land of Israel,
> Spreading her wings above the Nile
> On her way to a distant land
> Beyond the hills,
> The Ethiopian House of Israel
> Sits and waits expectantly...[28]

The dream and yearning to return to Jerusalem, nurtured by religious texts and tradition, found concrete expression in an 1862 active attempt to reach the holy city from Ethiopia. Tragically, the expedition, led by Abba Mahari and described by James Quirin as part of a "millennial 'back to Jerusalem' movement," ended with the death of most of the members of the group.[29]

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[27] *Ibid*., 218. (Passages quoted are translated from the French version unless otherwise indicated).

[28] Shalva Weil, "Longing for Jerusalem among the Beta Israel of Ethiopia," in *African Zion. Studies in Black Judaism*, eds. Edith Bruder, Tudor Parfitt, (New Castle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars' Press, 2012), 200-213, 204.

[29] A letter, which has become famous, was sent by Abba Sagga Amlak, a Beta Israel, to the Jerusalem community. It gives a clear idea of the spirit in which the unfortunate expedition was undertaken: "Has the time arrived that we should return to you, our city, the holy city of Jerusalem?...a great agitation has disturbed our hearts for they say that the time has arrived: the men of our country say: 'Separate yourselves from the Christians and go to your country, Jerusalem, and reunite with your brothers and offer up sacrifices to God, Lord of Israel, in the Holy Land'." See James Quirin, *The Evolution of the Ethiopian Jews. A History of the Beta Israel (Falasha) to 1920*, (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 159.

Yet the Jerusalem of the Beta Israel, as Shalva Weil makes very clear, was a mythical and imaginary Jerusalem unconnected with the real Jerusalem, although the Beta Israel were not the only community to mythologize a utopian Jerusalem and to take it to be real. Many Jews from Morocco made '*aliyah* to this same Jerusalem imagined by Jews from Ethiopia and not to the real Israel. Weil discusses "A Dream at the Price of Honor," a tale by Germaw Mengistu, which in 2009 won the best short story prize offered by the *Haaretz* daily, as a good example for understanding "the dissonance between the imagined and the 'real' Jerusalem."[30] The tale recounts the story of an old Beta Israel who leaves Ethiopia by plane for Israel. The old man says that when he heard a voice on the plane saying that they were flying over the city of Jerusalem, silence fell.

> Silence. Wrapped in our thoughts, we gazed upon Jerusalem in awe. I know exactly which Jerusalem each one of us sees in their imagination. I am 80 years old. One sees the Temple embellished with gold...another sees the Holy of Holies upon the Foundation Stone, which houses the Ark of the Covenant and the Cherubim in all their glory...[31]

However, these images of sacredness abruptly disappear on arrival at the *merkaz qelitah* [absorption center] where the old man hears the manager announce that he will teach the newcomers to forget their past lives and to assimilate their new culture. At this point, the old man utters the words of the title, epitomizing his own bitterness and that of the Beta Israel in general: "We have realized our dream at the price of our honor."[32]

In *Asterai*, the author describes the beautiful landscapes of Ethiopia and above all her clear lakes and rivers. Water is an important means of purification for the Jews of Ethiopia and plays a central role in the rites and customs of the Beta Israel (the hut for the woman who is impure because of her period or in childbirth, traditional marriage, belief in possession and spirits, the celebration of *sigd* [adoration], and more). This forms an introduction to the life of the Beta Israel before emigration. There is a detailed portrayal of daily life, described as harmonious, worthy and rich in values, as if the author wished, on the one hand, to address members of his community to promote their Ethiopian customs and to strengthen and highlight Ethiopian identity, and, on the other, to show

[30] Weil, "Longing for Jerusalem among the Beta Israel of Ethiopia," 209.

[31] *Ibid.*, 209.

[32] *Ibid.*, 211.

Israelis the dignity and purity of the Ethiopian past. A long section dwells on the trauma of the journey to the Sudan (an experience undergone by the author as an adolescent) and the years spent in refugee camps. The protagonist examines the pointlessness of so many lives lost and denounces those who allowed the immigrants to leave without taking into account the risks: "He was furious with those who had told the community to abandon everything and go to the Sudan. They had organized the journey badly and brought about the death of many of the immigrants. And on recalling the long march, Fetgu shed bitter tears."[33] Portraying life in Israel, pages cry out against Israeli integration policies, based on the author's own experience as a boarder: "That is how a joyful, amiable young boy becomes a gloomy, withdrawn adolescent."[34] Some passages recall other writings, based on similar experiences, by Eli Amir[35] and Daniel ben Simhon.[36] Tegamlak Avera writes that Israel in no way corresponds to the dreamt of Jerusalem. He even has his protagonist say, "So where have I got to? he asks himself. Is it the land of my ancestors? Is it perhaps not the Land of Israel promised to our father Abraham? Have we perhaps lost our way? Are we perhaps elsewhere? Maybe after so many centuries no one knows the way to Jerusalem any longer?"[37]

These lines voice the confusion the new immigrants feel in the face of a *Yerussalem* born of myths and dreams and situated in a country which does not retain its purity, a central value for the Beta Israel who, as the author of this article wrote in 1985,[38] had left a country where they could maintain a perfect state of purity and come to the mythical *Yerussalem* only to find themselves impure. In *Asterai*, the theme of water and purity plays out around the pure rivers and basins of Ethiopia, around the cleansing water into which the main character would dive to achieve natural, religious, mystical purification: Fetgu, in Ethiopia "approached the basin. The rays of the moon tinged the water with a sparkling, metallic whiteness... he dived into the depths and lay there. He imagined himself to be a drop of pure water and saw how he blended with the

[33] Tegamlak Avera, *Asterai*, 189. The Hebrew text is much stronger: "He was furious over the negligence and the lack of responsibility of those who had brought on death...," 196 (author's translation).

[34] *Ibid.*, 193.

[35] Eli Amir, *Tarnegol kapparot*, (Tel Aviv: Am 'Oved, 1983), published in translation as: *Scapegoat,* (London: Weidenfeld – Nicholson, 1987).

[36] Daniel Ben Simhon, *Ha-marokaim* [*The Moroccans*], (Jerusalem: Karmel, 2016).

[37] Tegamalak Avera, *Asterai*, 195.

[38] Emanuela Trevisan Semi, "The Beta Israel (Falashas). From Purity to Impurity," *The Jewish Journal of Sociology* 27 (1985): 103-114.

other droplets filling the basin."[39] In Israel, after dreams in which he is accused of impurity and the Beta Israel shout at him "Impure... Shame on you" he immerses himself in the Jordan River: "He undressed and dived naked into the cool water. Straightaway his body became water and everything he had experienced at the time of the *kwagmé*[40] in Ethiopia repeated itself."[41] Like a Beta Israel monk, for a week he would eat only chickpeas soaked in water and bathe each morning in the basin, the usual way of purifying oneself in Ethiopia. The purifying catharsis allows him eventually to rebuild his ruptured identity.

Yilma Shemuel explains that he wrote *Ha-Derekh li-Yrushalaim* primarily for the young people in his own '*edah* [community] so that they might know their own past, but also that he was writing for Israelis in order that they might be better informed about a group with a glorious past. The author was moved to write the work when his younger brother, who was born in Israel and did not understand Tigrinya, asked him why the *engera* [traditional Ethiopian breads] so bitter, explaining that he preferred bread with chocolate spread. Yilma Shemul, confronted with this question, an expression of alienation from Ethiopian origins – *engera* is basic to Ethiopian cuisine – the author feels he is at the *Pesah seder,* where the youngest ritually asks why the evening is different from any other night. He decides to recount "the exodus from Ethiopia" like "the exodus from Egypt," the central theme of the Passover *seder.*[42]

Yilma Shemuel presents us with a text comprising a number of parts, including sketches, drawings and photos of Ethiopia, the villages left behind, and migration. In the first part, which is autobiographical, he narrates his journey through the Sudan at the age of 11. He is the nephew of Ferede Aklum, who in 1979 fled the Sudan and became an agent of the Mossad, promoting the '*aliyah* of the Beta Israel (through the Sudan) in the 1980s. His adventurous life is recounted in the book.

The story begins, as *Asterai* similarly does, with a childhood spent between home and the Addi Vorona (Tigray) village school until it is abruptly interrupted by the news spreading from one village to another of imminent redemption, the *geulah*, "after 2000 years of *galut.*"[43]

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[39] Tegamalak Avera, *Asterai*, 74.

[40] The *Kwagmé* are the 5-6 days during which the community bathes in the river each morning.

[41] Tegamalak Avera, *Asterai*, 210.

[42] Shemuel, *Ha-derekh li-Yrushalaim*, 15.

[43] *Ibid.*, 13.

These were troubled times in the Tigray, where guerrillas of the Tigray People's Liberation Front were fighting the *derg* (Ethiopian military government) of Menghistu, a situation creating a climate of instability in the region. Departures took place in groups made up initially of family members and friends and joined along the way by Beta Israel from other villages, together forming a caravan.

The narrative model is the mythical one of the "exodus from Egypt," – the Biblical narration in the Book of Exodus taken up in the *Haggadah* and read during the Passover *seder*, as if the exodus from Egypt became the introjected model for narrating every exodus. The Beta Israel leave silently when in the sky shines a pure, clear moon, an hour after all the other inhabitants of the village have fallen asleep "because our fathers also left Egypt at a similar time."[44] They leave because Jerusalem awaits them and Ethiopia is no longer their land; even after 2000 years of living there they continue to feel in exile because that is what the sacred text recounted and that is what the tales of the elders repeated. The protagonist narrates that "at home one spoke always of the holy Jerusalem belonging to the Jewish People and all our prayers were directed toward the holy city, Jerusalem. His parents never ceased to speak of holy Jerusalem and all children knew that that was their land and that one day they would get there,"[45] so when the news of the approaching end of *galut* and the advent of *geulah* spread, everyone was ready to set off.

Despite numerous vicissitudes, Shemuel's journey through the Sudan ended happily thanks, in part, to the intervention of Ferede, who put his family on the list of passengers to board the plane sent by Israel (via Athens). However, as in "A Dream at the Price of Honor," there is overwhelming disappointment upon landing at Lod. Not only did everyone expect to disembark directly in Jerusalem, but they were also certain that the land of their dreams was exceptional, because if Jerusalem was the City of Gold, then the land, too, should have been golden:

> Where is the golden Jerusalem? Why ever is the land not made of gold?... how was it possible that in Jerusalem there were only white men and not holy men (like angels)? How was it possible that all the tales we had heard as children from adults about Jerusalem were not true?[46]

[44] *Ibid.*, 41.
[45] *Ibid.*, 98.
[46] *Ibid.*, 66.

Reality emerges when the new arrivals are received at the *merkaz qelitah* in the Negev, where the narrator is supposed to wear a *kippah*, an item of clothing which for him means nothing Jewish at all. It reminds him of the head covering of Muslims instead, along with the need to change his own name and endure a welcome of punches and insults such as "little nigger!" from the local children.[47] From Ofaqim the newcomers are eventually transferred to Beer Sheba; not to Jerusalem.

The theme of Jerusalem returns several times in the tale, a Jerusalem strangely inhabited by a white population, not black as the stories had it in Ethiopia: "I have grown up with the tales of Jerusalem and never would I have imagined that people like this lived there...I was surprised to see that whites inhabited Jerusalem."[48]

The story that began in Ethiopia ends there, as well, as in *Asterai*. While entire families had left Ethiopia, a group of young people wishing to take part in a journey "back to the roots" departs from Israel for Ethiopia. Yilma Shemuel presents the trip as a sort of "completion of a circle" because "in those roots the future is buried." This is why, when the young people ask the inhabitants now living in the houses the visitors had abandoned as children, if they might enter their homes, the reason for their request is, "We have not come to look for something but to see where we originate."[49]

Returning to one's roots in the abandoned Ethiopia, a mythical and mythicized Jerusalem not corresponding to reality, and an announced but unfulfilled promise of redemption, are some of the motifs in the tale by Yilma Shemuel.

Conclusion

The protagonists of *Asterai*, *Ha-Derekh li-Yrushalaim*, and *Avne shaish tahor*, in order to piece together the fragments of their ruptured identity, must experience a catharsis involving a return to their country in search of the threads which emigration had broken, threads of gesture, customs and memories of the past.

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[47] *Ibid.*, 68-70.

[48] *Ibid.*, 89.

[49] *Ibid.*, 110.

However, this past and the country of origin are not threatening or terrifying as they are for many Ashkenazi Jewish writers; on the contrary, they are a source of relief, of strengthening identity, of narrative imagination, a necessary step in holding out in the new land of exile, thanks to literary creativity. We can say that in the ultimate deconstruction of Zionist discourse of exile and redemption, an important role will be played by authors of Moroccan and Ethiopian origin.

A similar role has also been played by cinema, where the movies of Ronit Elkabetz, an actress and filmmaker of Moroccan origin, are a good example of the Moroccan case in point. In her movies, there is an abundance of Moroccan idiom, traditions and culture, creating a positive link with the rich past of the country. As for Ethiopia, a new movie has been released, *Etz teena* [*The Fig Tree*] by Elem-Werqe Davidian (2018), an Israeli woman filmmaker who immigrated as a child from Ethiopia. The film was shot mostly in Ethiopia and shows the natural marvels of the land. It provides a good illustration of the same phenomenon as the one analyzed in literature. In this movie, a girl left in Ethiopia with her grandmother by her mother who immigrated to Israel previously, does not want to leave her country when the time comes for her and her grandmother to leave, as well. A similar trend has been analyzed in contemporary Ethiopian Israeli music by Ilana Webster-Kogen. She has noticed that Ester Rada, a well-known Ethiopian Israeli singer, performs in English (or where appropriate in Amharic) but not in Hebrew, and is strongly influenced by African-American, Caribbean and Ethiopian tunes, "linking Ethiopian Israelis to the historical narrative of the African diaspora instead of the Israeli narrative of rejecting the Jewish diasporic state of exile."[50] Just as with the writers that I have analyzed, the focus is on the "old country," the country of exile, which should be repudiated and hated, according to Zionist discourse, although we find experienced reality to be the very opposite of this.

If in the case of writers from East Europe, as I explained at the beginning, there are certain contradictions and ambivalences attaching to the rejection of the diaspora in literary discourse, in the case of writers from Morocco and Ethiopia, this ambiguity is even more noticeable where "home" seems to be the land of exile.

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[50] Ilana Webster-Kogen, *Citizen Azmari. Making Ethiopian Music in Tel Aviv*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2018), 27.

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