Between Italy and Ethiopia, Western and African Judaism: The Story of Taamrat Emmanuel, a Jewish Intellectual from Ethiopia

by *Emanuela Trevisan Semi*

Abstract

Emmanuel Taamrat (1888-1963) is one of the first young men belonging to the Beta Israel (Falashas), brought from Ethiopia to Europe by Jacques Faitlovitch in order to be "regenerated by Western Judaism." After two years spent in Paris, he was sent to Florence in 1906 where he studied with rabbi Margulies at Collegio Rabbinico in Florence. He remained in Italy for thirteen years because of the First World War and in 1919 he went to Palestine and after to Ethiopia. He spent most of his life as director of the Falasha school in Addis Abeba but in 1937 he was obliged to flee to Egypt after the attempt to assassinate General Graziani because of his well-known opposition to the fascist regime. He helped the Ethiopian resistance and was appointed by Hailé Selassie on his coming back to Ethiopia as President of the Committee of Public Education. In 1948 he was sent to Paris as cultural attaché at the Ethiopian embassy. He was influenced by Italian socialist and anarchist important figures and ideas before the rise of Fascism. As a very free and independent individual he suffered from his condition of being double colonized, by western Judaism and by Italian occupation. He was colonized by Italian Jews and western Jews and subject to the strong authority of Faitlovitch and by the Italians during the Italian occupation. But he was also profoundly fascinated by European Jewish culture and by Western thought and Italy's language and customs. His own life could be another representation of the idea proposed by Albert Memmi of a colonized and colonizing Jew. He died in Israel.

Jacques Faitlovitch and Paris Circles

Correspondence as Source

Emmanuel Taamrat from Asmara to Paris

From Paris to Italy

The beginning of the movement of Beta Israel people, known at that time as Falashas, between Italy and Ethiopia may be considered in an overall context characterized by the ideology of "regeneration" advanced by the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU),[1] the arrival in Ethiopia of missionaries of the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews[2] and the presence of Italian colonialism in Eritrea. The ideology of "regeneration," which played an important role in the founding of the Alliance, envisaged the need for a rebirth of the Jewish communities in the East and in North Africa to be achieved, in part, by setting up a network of schools. This ideology was extended to Ethiopia by Joseph Halévy[3] and Jacques Faitlovitch, even though this went against the expressed desires of the

[1] Emanuela Trevisan Semi, "The Ideology of 'Regeneration' and the Beta Israel at the Beginning of the XXth Century," *Revue Européenne des Etudes Hébraiques* 2 (1997): 69-82.

[2] James Quirin, *The Evolution of the Ethiopian Jews. A History of the Beta Israel (Falasha) to 1920* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992); Steven Kaplan, *The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia, from Earliest Times to the Twentieth Century* (New York-London: New York University Press, 1992); Don Seeman, *One people, one blood. Ethiopian Israelis and the return to Judaism* (New Brunswick-London: Rutgers University Press, 2009).

[3] Joseph Halévy, a Jew from Adrianople, traveled among the Beta Israel in 1867-1868 on behalf of the AIU, see Joseph Halévy, "Travels in Abissina," in *Miscellany of Hebrew Literature*, ed. Albert L. Loewi (London: 1877), vol. 2, 175-256. On Halévy see Monica Miniati, "Joesph Halévy un outsider dans la ville," in *Les Juifs d'Ethiopie, de Joseph Halévy à nos jours, un siècle de rencontres, 25 ans d'immigration massive*, ed. Daniel Friedmann (Paris: Les éditions du Nadir, 2007), 23-44.

Alliance.[4] According to the ideology of the time, not only should schools be opened in areas that lacked them, but the most talented young people living in the areas that needed "regeneration" should be sent away to be educated in a western Jewish context.[5] The first young man from the Beta Israel to be brought to France was Daniel (we know him only by his first name). He was accompanied by Halévy, who was returning from his journey to Abyssinia in 1868. The purpose of Daniel's journey was "in order for him to be regenerated by Western Judaism."[6] In the nineteenth century Daniel was the only Beta Israel youth to be sent away to study. He died in Egypt (he was not accepted in France by the Alliance, which claimed that he was a slave bought in a slave market in Africa and not a Jew). However, in the following century 25 Beta Israel boys[7] were sent from Ethiopia to Europe, specifically to Italy, France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Great Britain, Serbia, Rhodes, Palestine and Egypt.[8] The arrival in 1859 in Ethiopia of missionaries

---

4 See Emanuela Trevisan Semi, *Jacques Faitlovitch and the Jews of Ethiopia* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2007), 14-37.

5 Aron Rodrigue, *De l'instruction à l'emancipation. Les enseignants de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle et les Juifs d'Orient 1860-1939* (Paris: Calman-Levy, 1989); Aron Rodrigue, *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition. The Teachers of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, 1860-1939* (Seattle-London: University of Washington Press, 1993); Michael Laskier, *The Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Jewish Communities of Morocco 1862-1962* (Albany: Suny Press, 1984).

6 Trevisan Semi, *Jacques Faitlovitch*, 15.

7 Shalva Weil writes that she drew up the list with the help of Tadesse Yaacov (one of Faitlovitch's pupils). See Shalva Weil, "The Life and Death of Salomon Isaac" in *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel, Studies on the Ethiopian Jews*, eds. Tudor Parfitt and Emanuela Trevisan Semi (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999), 47.

8 For a general overview on Faitlovitch's pupils see Shalva Weil, "Beta Israel Students Who Studied Abroad 1905-1935," in *Research in Ethiopian Studies: Selected Papers of the 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Trondheim, July 2007,* eds. Harald Aspen, Birhanu Teferra, Shiferaw Bekele and Svein Ege, Äthiopistiche Forschungen Vol. 72 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), 84-92. For Taamrat Emmanuel and Makonnen Levi see Emanuela Trevisan Semi, "Ethiopian Jews in Europe: Taamrat Emmanuel in Italy and Makonnen Levi in England," in *Jews of Ethiopia. The Birth of an Elite*, eds. Tudor Parfitt and Emanuela Trevisan Semi (London-New York: Routledge, 2005), 74-100; for Taamrat Emmanuel see Itzhak Grinfeld, "Taamrat Emmanuel Forerunner of the Revival of Ethiopian Jewry," *Pe'amim* 22 (1985): 70-71 (in Hebrew); Emanuela Trevisan Semi, *L'epistolario di Taamrat Emmanuel: un intellettuale ebreo d'Etiopia nella prima metà del XX secolo/ La correspondance de Taamrat Emmanuel: intellectuel juif d'Ethiopie dans la première moitié du XXème siècle* (Torino: L'Harmattan Italia, 2000); Emanuela Trevisan Semi, *Taamrat Emmanuel, an Ethiopian Jewish Intellectual between Colonized and Colonizers* (New York: CPL editions, Primo Levi Center, 2018); Shalva Weil, "Taamrat Emmanuel," in *Encyclopedia Aethiopic*a, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag 2010) Vol. 4, 1082-

under the auspices of the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews marked the first time European Jews really paid attention to the Beta Israel of Ethiopia, an initiative provoked largely by a desire to counteract the missionary intervention. This contributed to the process that brought the Beta Israel to the attention of European and, later on, American Jews.

Jacques Faitlovitch and Paris Circles

It was Jacques Faitlovitch, a Jew from Poland, and a pupil of Joseph Halévy in Paris, who organized the missions to Ethiopia to oppose the missionaries' activity. Paris at the beginning of the twentieth century was going through exciting times. It was the post-Dreyfus period when the values of freedom and tolerance seemed to have been established once and for all, and the French Jewish community was trying to spread modernization, a process which had begun in the previous century. Paris attracted Jews from Eastern Europe who came to study—often Semitic languages. Paris became a rallying point for Jews looking for freedom and national redemption. Nahum Slouschz, born in a little town near Vilnius, became professor of Hebrew language and literature at the Sorbonne after studying at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes and he preceded Faitlovitch in his studies in

1083. On Hizkiahu Finkas see Emanuela Trevisan Semi, "From Wolleqa to Florence: The Tragic Story of Faitlovitch's Pupil Hizkiahu Finkas," in *The Beta Israel*, 15-39. For Tadesse Yacob see Shalva Weil, "Tadesse Yacob of Cairo and Addis Abeba," *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 2, no. 1-2 (2006): 233-243, Shalva Weil, "Tadesse Yaqob," in *Encyclopedia* (2010) Vol. 4, 1196-1197. For Abraham Adgheh see Shalva Weil, "Abraham Adgeh: The Perfect English Gentleman," in *Jews of Ethiopia,* 101-111, Shalva Weil, "Abraham Adgeh," in *Encyclopedia* (2003) 1, 48; For Yona Bogale, Shalva Weil, "In Memoriam: Yona Bogale," *Pe'amim* 33 (1987): 140-144 (in Hebrew), Shalva Weil, "Yona Boggala", in *Encyclopedia* (2013) 5, 90. For Salomon Isaac, see Shalva Weil, "The Life and Death of Solomon Isaac," in *The Beta Israel*, 40-49; Shalva Weil, "Salomon Yeshaq," in *Encyclopedia* (2010) Vol. 4, 499-500; Sigrid Sohn, "S. Schachnowitz's Novel Salomo der Falascha (1923)," in *Jews of Ethiopia*, 53-64. On Ermias Essayas see Shalva Weil, "Ermias Essayas: A 'Forgotten' Ethiopian Jew in Jerusalem," in *Homelands and Diasporas: Perspectives on Jewish Culture in the Mediterranean and Beyond. Festschrift for Emanuela Trevisan Semi*, eds. Dario Miccoli, Marcella Simoni and Giorgia Foscarini (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 14-26. For Gete Yirmiahu see Carlo Guandalini, "Gete Yirmiahu and Beta Israel's Regeneration: A Difficult Path," in *Jews of Ethiopia*, 112-121. For Setotow, Mekuria, Abel and Menguistu see Benjamin Mekuria, "The Long Journey of the Beta Yisrael from Lasta," in *The Beta Israel*, 296-300.

Paris by a few years. Faitlovitch studied Amharic and Ge'ez with Joseph Halévy, Assyrian philology with Jules Julius Oppert and Arabic with Hartwig Derenbourg. At that time, the teaching of Semitic languages was carried out primarily by Jewish scholars, most of whom were of Ashkenazi origin.

The story of Faitlovitch and later on of Taamrat Emmanuel (1888-1963) began in these Parisian circles, which served as incubators of ideas for many Jews who had come from the East, full of dreams of personal and national redemption. It was in these circles that the idea was born of the first mission to Ethiopia to "regenerate" its Jews.

Correspondence as Source

We do not have any real memoirs by the young Beta Israel who arrived in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century. Hence, we lack an important type of source that has been fruitfully used in research on Jews from Arab-Muslim countries, such as Morocco or Iraq.[9] What we do have are some notebooks and a number of letters (some in diary form) sent from the youths to their mentor, Faitlovitch, generally conveying strong feelings of nostalgia and loneliness, and the painful process of adapting to such a different context. Indeed, it was so harsh an experience that there were cases of suicide.[10] In the case of Taamrat, we have 108 letters to Faitlovitch but we have only three letters by Faitlovitch to his pupil.[11] In

[9] See Nadia Malinovich, "Growing up in interwar Iraq: the Memoirs of Naim Kattan and Heskel Haddad," *Journal of Jewish Identities* 12, no. 1 (2019): 19-36; Lital Levy, "Self and the City: Literary Representations of Jewish Baghdad," *Prooftexts* 26 (2006): 163-211; Emanuela Trevisan Semi "Lifewriting 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), 68-84; Emanuela Trevisan Semi, "Rethinking Morocco. Life-writing of Jews from Morocco," *Hespéris-Tamuda* 51, no. 3 (partie 2) (2016): 141-164.

[10] There were also cases of boys who died of tuberculosis, like Yizkiahu Finkas (who died in Egypt) and Abraham Baroch (who died in Switzerland), or committed suicide like Abraham Meir (who died in Paris). See biographical notes in Trevisan Semi, *L'epistolario*, 369-376.

[11] All the letters in the Sourasky archives in Tel Aviv Central Library which are written in Italian have been published in Trevisan Semi, *L'epistolario.*

fact, when Taamrat fled Ethiopia following the massacre of Ethiopian elites in the aftermath of the attack on General Graziani in 1937, he burned all of Faitlovitch's letters. This happened when he was in Egypt, engaged in the resistance against the Italian occupation. Consequently, we can read his letters and try to guess what his "master," as he called him, wrote back to him, rather like a novel where one of the protagonists is missing. In order to understand the complex context of these movements between Ethiopia and Europe, I have used Faitlovitch's diary, carefully written down, year by year, in which he recorded all the people he met, his journeys, his impressions, his correspondence with many Jewish associations and political leaders.[12] I have also used Carlo Alberto Viterbo's letters to Taamrat and Faitlovitch,[13] the diary of the anarchist Leda Rafanelli (1880-1971), who fell in love with Taamrat,[14] and the Alliance archives. There are also Taamrat's writings, mostly in Amharic, that are still awaiting study.[15]

Emmanuel Taamrat from Asmara to Paris

During his first mission to Ethiopia in 1904, called the "counter mission" by the missionaries of the London Society, Faitlovitch found Taamrat in a Christian Swedish mission in Asmara. Taamrat was a brilliant and gifted young man who, according to Faitlovitch, had the potential to become the educator and "regenerator" of his own group, the Beta Israel of Ethiopia.

The Italian colony of Eritrea (and in particular its capital Asmara) was considered the best place to build a school for the Beta Israel at the beginning of the twentieth century. Faitlovitch decided to set up the first Pro-Falasha committee in 1907 in Florence because of the role played by Italy in the colonization of Eritrea, hoping to win the support of the Italian government for his project of founding the first Jewish school in the colony. The project failed because of the Alliance's

[12] Sourasky Archives, Tel Aviv Central Library, file 137.
[13] Private Archive of Carlo Alberto Viterbo's family, Florence.
[14] Reggio Emilia, Biblioteca Panizzi, the Bernini-Aurelio Chessa Family Archives.
[15] An Ethiopian scholar now settled in the USA, Brook Abdu, is working on Taamrat's writings in Amharic.

opposition, which did not wish to engage with black people of dubious Jewish origin. The Alliance, during Faitlovitch's second mission (1908), financed a separate mission headed by Turkey's chief Rabbi Haim Nahum, who returned with a negative report, stating that the Falashas were few and scattered and that building a school was not recommended.[16] The project failed also because of a lack of real interest on the part of the Italian colonial authorities and their ambiguous positions concerning the educational projects of a Polish Jew whose actions were viewed with skepticism and suspicion. Nonetheless, in 1923 a school for the Beta Israel was founded in Addis Abeba, thanks to Faitlovitch's good relations with Ras Tafari Makonnen, the future Haile Selassie, emperor of Ethiopia. Taamrat Emmanuel's real name was Taamrat Dawit. He became Taamrat Emmanuel when Faitlovitch changed his name, as he did with the other boys he took with him to Europe. In 1905 Taamrat was sent together with another boy, Gete Yirmiahu, to Paris, where he spent almost two years and where he was expected to adopt the western version of Judaism and abandon the old traditions of the Beta Israel.

We are informed of the boys' arrival in Paris by the Bulletin of the Alliance*:* "the two young men are about twenty, they speak only Ethiopian and Amharic: we didn't know what to do with them when they arrived in Paris. Although they are black-skinned, they do not have the flattened mask of the African Negro."

The Alliance's committee felt that a period at the Ecole Préparatoire with young people of their age would quickly knock the rough edges off them. And this indeed is what happened.[17] Another version of their arrival—in which the Alliance was forced to accept them at the school in Auteil, where they lost their "ignorant ways"—was provided two years after their stay in Paris, and after Taamrat had already been removed from the Alliance school and sent to Florence.

> To everyone's great surprise [Faitlovitch] returned with two Falashas who wandered around the streets of Paris for a few weeks. The Alliance was

[16] Haim Nahoum, "The Mission to the Falashas (interview)," *Jewish Chronicle,* August 7, 1908: 14.

[17] *AIU bulletin* 33 (1905): 206-207.

> forced, in some way, to accept them at the Ecole Normale d'Auteil. These young men had barely begun to lose some of their ignorant ways when Faitlovitch sent them away from the Ecole Normale—without informing the Alliance—to Florence, where a pro-Falasha Committee had been formed.[18]

We are surprised to read that the Alliance was "forced," because it is well known that the Alliance was not easily swayed and once taken, it was generally impossible to change its decisions. It is interesting to recall in this context that the young Taamrat, defined as "ignorant" by the Alliance, bought books by Voltaire in Paris,[19] knew Ge'ez, spoke Amharic, Tigrinya, and a little Italian. We do not know much about Taamrat's time in Paris, except that he must have learned French well, as Faitlovitch always corresponded with him in French.

From Paris to Italy

The official reason why Faitlovitch moved Taamrat to Florence was the relatively poor Jewish and Hebrew language education available at the Alliance school and his preference for the Rabbinical College in Florence, led at the time by Rabbi Shemuel Hirsch Margulies (1858-1822), and as well as Italian Colonial interests in Eritrea.[20] The decision would have a huge impact on Taamrat's intellectual, political, and emotional development. He flourished in the climate of cultivated Judaism and Zionism advanced by Rabbi Shemuel Hirsch Margulies and especially Zwi Perez Chajes, who was active in Florence, Turin and Vienna. Not only did Chajes teach Taamrat Hebrew, but instilled in him a love of literature. This is what Taamrat wrote when he was informed of Chajes's death: "If I went to him for Hebrew study, he always drew me in with unusual, original, and amusing discussions of Italian philology, literature, history, and culture. I owe to

[18] *AIU bulletin* 37 (1909): 65.

[19] I wish to thank Brook Abdu, who has worked with sources in Amharic written by Taamrat, for this information.

[20] Trevisan Semi, *Jacques Faitlovich*, 40-42.

him and only to him a love of Zion."[21] Florence and Italy exposed him to assimilated Italian Judaism and to the particularly lively cultural and political debates of that period. These were the years before World War I, when principles of democracy and liberalism proclaimed by great personalities like Giuseppe Mazzini and Carlo Cattaneo were considered commonly shared values. These were also the years of socialism. Figures like the socialist Raffaele Ottolenghi, the treasurer of the pro-Falasha Committee and a scholar of Jewish thought and biblical prophets,[22] had a considerable influence on Taamrat. Taamrat remained in Italy for a long time because of World War I, which made it impossible for him to go back to Ethiopia. During the period of the war Faitlovitch went to Switzerland.

The Influence of Raffaele Ottolenghi and Leda Rafanelli

During the thirteen years he spent in Italy, Taamrat met important figures who influenced him considerably. Through Raffaele Ottolenghi he met Leda Rafanelli (1880-1971), an Italian anarchist, novelist, feminist and anti-conformist with whom he had an affair which lasted two years, a closely-guarded secret at the time. However, I have found hitherto unknown documents, in particular Rafanelli's personal journal, in the anarchist's archive in Reggio Emilia, Italy,[23] which reveal details of the affair. Ottolenghi also helped Taamrat survive economically during the war in Italy.[24] Ottolenghi was a lawyer, philanthropist and a scholar of Judaism, with a particular interest in the biblical prophets, that he studied from a socialist and libertarian perspective, stressing their desire for social justice. It was at

[21] Taamrat's letter to Faitlovich, Addis Abeba, January15, 1928.

[22] He was close to Filippo Turati, one of the most important leaders of Italian socialism, who wrote about Ottolenghi that "He had principles of absolute idealism, which he saw eternally incarnate in the words of Isaiah [...] combative, pugnacious, bizarre, often hard to understand, socialist, one of a kind. Naturally he was the lawyer and the patron of the dispersed sons of Israel," *Critica sociale*, June 16-30, 1917: 62.

[23] The story was buried for many years in the small archive of the Berneri-Aurelio Chessa family in Reggio Emilia. I thank Fiamma Chessa for sharing information on Leda Rafanelli and providing archive material.

[24] Taamrat's letter to Faitlovitch January 15, 1918. In it Taamrat mentions a small inheritance left to him by Ottolenghi.

his house that Taamrat met the remarkable Leda Rafanelli. She spent several months in Alexandria in Egypt and was so fascinated with Islam that she become a Muslim.[25] It was Leda Rafanelli who wrote Ottolenghi's obituary in the Italian newspaper *Avanti*, in which she quoted Taamrat. She wrote of Ottolenghi that he was "a brilliant scholar of the Hebrew language [...]. I had the honor of helping him research some Arab works, and the Falasha Taamrat did the same with the Talmud, both of us devoted disciples." [26] Ottolenghi influenced Emmanuel Taamrat's ideas, as Rafanelli explains: "By talking to him, having him [Taamrat] read his articles, he [Ottolenghi] prepared him for his ongoing social battles. In his [Taamrat's] healthy, innocent, and lively mind, the seeds of socialist ideas put down roots, grew strong, emerged more beautiful."[27] In a very interesting part of her diary, Rafanelli describes the differences of opinion between Ottolenghi and Faitlovitch over Taamrat's future. According to Rafanelli, their opposing visions tormented Taamrat, who was torn between obedience to his mentor and his new passions and interests, including politics, which had blossomed during his stay in Italy, along with a desire for greater independence:

> The Maestro [Ottolenghi] disagreed with the Englishman [sic] [Faitlovitch],[28] who wanted Emmanuel to become a religious leader, a rabbi, and kept him far from all worldly temptations, jealously guarding this exceptional person, while our Great Host [Ottolenghi] hoped for more, for other projects in Emmanuel's future.[29]

Their affair ended at the end of the war, when Faitlovitch returned to Italy and obliged Taamrat to accompany him back to Ethiopia in order for him to become the future director of the school for the Falashas. From an entry in Faitlovitch's

---

[25] In Alessandria she was fascinated by a variety of mystical Islam, and she learned a little Arabic that she used, for instance, to sign her name. She used a pseudonym, Sahra/Sahara that Taamrat used to call her. She had a romantic vision of the East tinged by "Orientalism."

[26] *Avanti*, June 2, 1917.

[27] From the manuscript of Leda Rafanelli, *A Woman and Four Men from the East*. The Bernini-Aurelio Chessa Family Archives.

[28] Faitlovitch had relatives in England, maybe this confused Leda Rafanelli.

[29] For a more detailed story see Trevisan Semi, *Taamrat Emmanuel*, 57-81.

diary,[30] dated January 19, 1920, we realize that Taamrat's destiny had been sealed: "I [Faitlovitch] was alone all day [...]. Emmanuel finally appeared in the evening. We made peace and he submitted completely."[31] Taamrat's capitulation illustrated the complex and ambiguous relationship between Faitlovitch and Taamrat, the colonizer and the colonized. It was the total submission that Faitlovitch demanded of all his students, not only of Taamrat. Yet within that state of oppression, Taamrat tried to carve out a space for independent thought that sometimes enabled him to escape the yoke of expectations, but at other times he suffered the lack of any margin for independence or freedom. In 1923 the school would finally be opened, but because of the Italians' opposition, as we have seen, not in Eritrea but in Addis Abeba. The "regeneration" project that began with Taamrat's departure for France would now become a reality, and the director of the school would be Taamrat.

The influence of Ottolenghi, Leda Rafanelli, and socialist and anarchist ideas can be found throughout the life of Taamrat. In particular in 1927 Taamrat, by then the director of the school, translated from French into Amharic an article against Mussolini that had been published in France in the anarchist journal *Revolution prolétarienne*.[32] He published it in *Berhanenna Selam*,[33] adding a comment of his own: "The Italian people value and respect liberty. So those of us who feel they know this nation [Italy] are astonished to see a dictator reign tranquilly over its people."[34] Faitlovitch was furious with Taamrat for translating this article, because he always forbade him to engage in politics. Faitlovitch's harsh response is contained in those few letters to Taamrat that have come down to us, the only ones that possibly Taamrat did not dare to destroy, as they defined his fate. In them Faitlovitch treats him like a rebellious child, threatens to punish or abandon him, and tries to make him feel guilty by playing on his feelings, using phrases like

[30] Faitlovitch's diary is written in French and is kept in the Sourasky Archives, Tel Aviv University.
[31] Faitlovitch's diary, January 17, 1920.
[32] See also Itzhak Grinfeld, "Jews in Addis Abeba: Beginnings of the Jewish Community until the Italian Occupation," in *Ethiopian Studies: Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference*, ed. Gideon Goldberg (Tel Aviv:1980), 251-259.
[33] See Bahru Zewde, "The Ethiopian Intelligentsia and the Italo-Ethiopian war, 1935-1941," *The international Journal of African Historical Studies* 26, no. 2 (1993): 271-295.
[34] Letter to Faitlovitch, Addis Ababa, April 9, 1927.

"Your imprudence caused me to become so ill I stayed in bed for several days. Despite your error I won't dismiss you at present [...]. I don't want to abandon you."[35] The rules he set for his disciple were clear:

> I insist and require that you instantly abstain completely from political affairs, for or against, it doesn't matter. Don't involve yourself in the business of others [...]. Your name must never be publicly associated with anything that doesn't pertain to our work. Think every day about your task, which is already difficult enough without any more complications, and don't let yourself be distracted from your work and your obligations. At present you have a double responsibility and, beyond that, there's a very serious question of honor for you and for me in that affair. The renown and prestige of our work are naturally strongly compromised at present.[36]

Taamrat was forced to suppress a part of himself that identified with his own people, then threatened by a colonial power. One feels, reading what Taamrat wrote, that he expected just such a reaction from his master and that in some way even hoped that the incident might bring an end to their work together, as if he hoped to break a chain that had bound him for so long. He wrote: "If this episode has made me a hindrance to your work, I would sincerely prefer you to save your sacred project at my expense. I would support that strongly [...] because despite my prudence I may find myself overtaken by similar situations."[37] However, Faitlovitch did not give him the freedom he hoped for and Taamrat remained as the director of the school in Addis Abeba.[38]

---

[35] Letter by Faitlovitch, New York, May 31, 1927.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid.

[38] On Taamrat see also Itzhak Grinfeld, "Tamrat Emmanuel-Forerunner of the Revival of Ethiopian Jewry," *Pe'amim* 22 (1985): 59-74 (Hebrew).

Between Submission and Independence

In 1931 Taamrat left Ethiopia for the United States, where he met leaders of black Harlem communities interested in Judaism, like Rabbi W.A. Matthew, the future leader of the Commandment Keepers[39] and Rabbi Josiah Ford of Bet Bnai Avraham,[40] and he maintained his relationship with different Black Jews' movements throughout his life.

The 1933 Plan to Resettle German Jews in Ethiopia

While Mussolini's plan to resettle Italian Jews to Ethiopia in 1938-1939[41] is well-known, it is not known that Taamrat not only completely rejected it but also warned about the enormous risks for Italian Jews because he knew that the resistance to the Italians was very strong in Ethiopia and Jews could be at risk. Little is known also about Haile Selassie's plan to welcome Jews from Germany in 1933.[42]

Faitlovitch and Taamrat themselves had been appointed by the Negus to carry out this plan. Yet Taamrat seemed to be very critical, pointing out its flaws, voicing the doubts expressed by the Ethiopian intelligentsia, noting above all the

[39] The Commandment Keepers is a congregation of Black Hebrews founded by Rav Matthew in 1919 in New York. They are Afro-Americans (mostly of Caribbean origin) who claim to be of Falasha origins.

[40] Josiah Ford, a Barbadian by birth, was a musician, the choirmaster of the Universal Negro Improvement Association. He became a central figure in the movement which theorized Blacks' identification with Ethiopians and with Ethiopian Jews. He was so invested in the creation of a new Ethiopian Jewish identity for himself and for American Blacks that he actually moved to Ethiopia on the crest of 'the Back to Africa' movement created by Marcus Garvey. See Emanuela Trevisan Semi, "The 'Falashisation' of the Blacks of Harlem, a Judaising Movement in 20th Century Usa," in *Judaising Movements, Studies in the Margins of Judaism*, eds. Tudor Parfitt and Emanuela Trevisan Semi (London: Routledge Curzon, 2002), 87-110.

[41] Sergio Minerbi, "Il progetto di un insediamento ebraico in Etiopia (1936-1943)," in *Storia contemporanea* 17 (1986): 1083-1137; Angelo Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa orientale, la caduta dell'impero* (Bari: Laterza, 1982), 269-275; Richard Pankhurst, "Plans for Mass Jewish Settlement in Ethiopia (1936-1943)," https://tezetaethiopia.wordpress.com/2005/04/20/plans-for-mass-jewish-settlement-in-ethiopia-1936-1943br-smallby-richarch-pankhurst/. Accessed May 17, 2021.

[42] Letter to Faitlovitch, Cairo, October 22, 1939.

economic constraints that represented the daily reality in Ethiopia and that he knew all too well. According to him, the project could not provide resources in keeping with the expectations and qualifications of German Jews. Taamrat thought that the project did not have adequate political or economic backing and that the reality of Ethiopia at that moment would not provide the immigrants with a decent living. The few who had already emigrated to Ethiopia and with whom Taamrat was in daily contact had encountered extreme difficulties.

In any case, the operation remained only an idea, probably due to the economic difficulties that Taamrat noted, and in the end only a small number of German Jews came to Addis Abeba.

In a letter addressed to Faitlovitch he quoted exactly what he told the Emperor:

> Just think, Your Majesty, that among the great minds of Germany, there are chemists that the Germans themselves, even given these times, agree have contributed to the war effort. Your majesty will easily understand that those kinds of people, chased out of Germany, will find positions wherever they go. If Your Majesty desires the greatest among the Jews, I am sure that you'll understand the need to offer appropriate conditions. Hitler may claim that every ministry that Jews were part of collapsed and failed. But history refutes that: I repeat the words of the Sultan of Turkey, who said recently that the expulsions of Jews turned out to be the decline of Spain and the prosperity of Turkey. Who knows, maybe your Majesty will end up saying the same about Germany today.[43]

Taamrat was a realist and tried to convince the Negus to put forward a serious financial plan, failing which he thought that it would be better to give the plan up. In any case, in 1933 Taamrat could not have imagined what the conditions of the German Jews would become in the space of a few years.

[43] Letter to Faitlovitch, Addis Abeba, June 29, 1933.

When at the end of October 1939, the news arrived of a plan by Mussolini to install thirty thousand Italian Jews in Ethiopia, right to the south of Tana Lake, Taamrat, who was in Egypt at the time, was seriously worried because he knew that there was strong resistance to the Italian occupation and that the Jews would be perceived just as "Italians." As such they would face Ethiopian resistance and all the dangers that entailed. He immediately warned Faitlovitch of the danger:

> To install thirty thousand Jewish settlers in Ethiopia [and precisely south of Lake Tana, where an industrial center for the canned fish factory would be developed], the organizers would need fifty million dollars. While I know that Jews generally know where to throw themselves and where to throw their money, I also hope that their attempts don't start soon. Unless Italy, maintaining its neutrality in the current conflict in Europe, makes a second invasion of Ethiopia, currently its forces are too weak compared with the rebels of that region. I tell you to relieve my conscience.[44]

In reality a close reading of documents from the period suggests that the idea of a Jewish settlement in Ethiopia was only a trial balloon by Mussolini, a strategy he used to maintain the illusion that the Jews had a future.

Taamrat and the Italian Occupation

In 1936, while he was the director of the Falasha school in Addis, Taamrat saw the arrival of the Italians as conquerors of Ethiopia. In February 1937, at the time of the attack on General Graziani, the Governor of Ethiopia, he was not in Addis but in the north of Ethiopia, in Gondar, where most of the Beta Israel lived. He was there to accompany Giuseppe Viterbo, the Jewish Italian lawyer sent from the Union of the Israelite Italian Communities to investigate the Falashas, immediately after the birth of the Italian Colonial Empire.[45] In fact, after the

[44] Letter to Faitlovitch, Cairo, October 22, 1939.

[45] Carlo Alberto Viterbo, an Italian Jewish lawyer, was sent by the Union of the Israelite Italian Communities to Ethiopia in order to organize the Jews who had settled there and to get in touch with the Beta Israel population and investigate them. He stayed in Ethiopia from July 1936 to

attempt to assassinate General Graziani, the Italians decided to kill the Ethiopian elites who were in Addis and got after Taamrat too. By chance he was in Djibouti, seriously ill with malaria, but when he understood the risks, he escaped first to Aden and then to Egypt. He wrote that when he was still in Djibouti, thinking of returning to Addis, he received alarming letters from the city.

> They begged and begged me not to return [...] they told me that agents often came to the school to find out where I was, and my friends from Addis saw clearly that I was a candidate for death in Italian eyes: those who did higher studies and the people of a certain importance were singled out for shooting or deportation to Ogaden or Sardinia. But if the hand of God had not sent me that fever, I, ignorant of the reason, was determined to go back to Addis.[46]

While he was in Aden in 1937 he met the Italian consul, and told him what he thought about Fascism and Mussolini.

During this meeting Taamrat gave a speech, full of passion and vehemence, using arguments that could have come right from Raffaele Ottolenghi or Leda Rafanelli, saying:

> I told him that I am Abyssinian and that [...] until May 5, 1936 [the day of the arrival of the Italians in Addis] I was against the Italian occupation but [...] [that] afterwards, given the situation, I became resigned and, however difficult it is to work under a dictatorship, since collaborating with it was out of the question, I decided to patiently return to my job as a teacher, which I still do, under Italian domination.[47]

February 1937. In 1940 he was arrested as a "Zionist" and sent to the concentration camp of Sforzacosta (Macerata) in Italy. He wrote a "Relazione al Ministero dell'Africa Italiana dell'opera svolta in A.O.I in rappresentanza dell'Unione delle comunità israelitiche italiane," which was published in *Israel, "un decennio" 1974-1984, Saggi sull'ebraismo italiano*, ed. Francesco Del Canuto (Roma: Carucci, 1984), 47-113; for the journal about his trip, see Carlo Alberto Viterbo, Aharon Cohen, *Ebrei d'Etiopia, due diari (1936 e 1976)* (Firenze: Giuntina, 1993).

[46] Letter to Faitlovitch, Alexandria, September 19, 1937.

[47] Ibid.

He continued:

> Because I opposed the Italian occupation. Because I am an Abyssinian. Because I opposed the dictatorship. 'Opposed the dictatorship?' Yes! Of course! And it's all your fault—or your merit. I was young when I went to Italy, where you taught me democratic values and made me hate Caesar and Napoleon. I am a reader and admirer of your Mazzini [...]. How many Italians do you find who conduct themselves in a noble manner with us? We natives have been left in the hands of much wickedness and treated like dogs. And then tell me, why did you come to Abyssinia? To make us happy? If you're not [happy] either? And what are you doing in Spain? You massacre us because we are barbarians, but who are the barbarians in Spain? The French-English-Russians, or you and Hitler with your regimes? So, I don't know what else to say except this world is still barbaric. And there's not much choice between barbarians and barbarians. For me, a civilization is barbaric when, to teach civilization, it can't find any other way but to spill innocent blood. And I repeat again that those are ideas that were taught to me by no other teacher but Italy. Now at age fifty, I am not able to relinquish these ideas even if you, my teachers, change flags and shirts every day.[48]

He did not share the feelings of the majority of Italian Jews, who were in favor of Mussolini. He warned them not to trust Mussolini, and after the publication of the Racial Laws he wrote to some representatives in Italy to remind them of his warnings.

His judgment of what was happening in Italy was critical and fierce. He noted that most Italian Jews wasted time accommodating to the new regime, unable to predict or understand what was going to happen, leaving themselves open to being blindsided. Of this he must have spoken at length with Giuseppe Viterbo during their trip to Gondar, and they had disagreed. In particular Taamrat, as he explained later, did not share the optimism of the Italian lawyer and never believed

[48] Ibid.

the reassurances that the Regime was well intentioned towards the Beta Israel people. When he fled to Egypt, afraid of compromising his friends in Italy and his students in Addis, he preferred not to write or to respond to any letters he received. After the publication of the Racial Laws, he justified his decision to Faitlovitch in a parody of the biblical verse: "I said I didn't write and it was so. And it was evening, and it was morning, and evening, and then night, and Taamrat saw that all, especially the night, was good."[49] In the same letter he explained that Viterbo's and other Italian Jewish leaders' optimism about Fascism was wrong and facts were proving this.

In 1940, while he was in Egypt, Taamrat chose not to follow Faitlovitch, who had settled in Palestine, but preferred to help the Ethiopian opposition to reconquer Ethiopia. In 1941, Allied troops and resistance fighter entered the country triumphantly with the son and royal heir of Haile Selassie, Asfa Wossen.

> The prince [wrote Taamrat] honored me with his company and we were companions. He allowed me to take the most lovely villa of Azazo but I did not want to abuse his generosity. The return trip [Gondar-Debre Tabor-Addis] was, I think, more interesting. Separated from the huge army, we proceeded all the way to Addis [three days] alone with three cars and a group of machine gunners and riflemen. During the trip, we were feted by triumphant patriots, by caroling priests and women shouting for joy. The prince, courteous, jovial and serious at the same time, spoke to the soldiers and the poor. One car was full of *talleri* when we left, but I don't think even one *tallero* remained when we arrived at Dessie. It had all been distributed to the population of Amhara, which had demonstrated its loyalty and sympathy. The Falasha had also showed loyalty and affection. They—according to [the Prince's] wish—had a separate audience at the Palace of Fasil. The Prince now has to be in Gondar while, tied down by work, I am here, far from the Falasha and the Prince, whom I had helped in some of his legislative work.[50]

[49] Letter to Faitlovitch, Cairo, October 6, 1938.

[50] Letter to Faitlovitch, Addis Abeba, March 6, 1942.

Taamrat was appointed by Haile Selassie President of the Committee of Public Education and in 1948 sent to Paris as cultural attaché to the Ethiopian delegation in Paris. But he was too free and independent and could not refrain from expressing his political thoughts to the Emperor, so after criticizing Haile Sellasie he was exiled to Asmara and then went to Jerusalem, where he died.

Conclusion: Colonized and Colonizer

To conclude, Taamrat was subject to the authority of Faitlovitch, who forced him to be simply the director of the school for the Falashas in Addis Abeba, preventing him from expressing political ideas and his feelings against Fascism and the Italian occupation. On the contrary, Taamrat was expected to accept the Italian occupation and colonization of Ethiopia. As a native Jew, he also felt pressured by the colonial vision of the official representatives of Italian Jewry who subscribed to Italy's so-called civilizing mission in Ethiopia and thought that colonization might allow them to impose the values of Italian and western Judaism upon the indigenous Jews of Ethiopia. This gives an image of Taamrat as doubly colonized by the Italians and by Italian Jews, and it confirms the picture of the colonized native, marginalized and forced into a passive role.

But another image of Taamrat shows him to be fascinated by European Jewish culture, by western thought, and by Italy's language and customs. These were an integral part of his personality, as he said throughout his life. He was always attired in a Western-style suit, with a shirt and tie or bow tie, like his friends during his stay in Italy. The photos taken by Viterbo during the trip to Gondar show Viterbo wearing a sweater, whereas Taamrat is wearing a jacket and a tie. His free spirit, his independence and critical thinking, his suspicion of power, his sarcasm, and his irony flowered and were nurtured during his years in Italy as a young man.

To return to the idea proposed by Albert Memmi of the colonized Jew and the colonizing Jew, it seems to me that Taamrat is a good example of the shadow and light that characterize those who belong to this group, intriguing and complex, and so skillfully described by the Jewish-Tunisian writer.

Taamrat found himself in the condition that Dominique Schnapper[51] defined as a "minorité redouble," a double minority, part of a minority among the colonized, who had become a political minority submitted to the colonial power, but also a minority among western Italian Jewry. He was even three times part of a minority, as an Ethiopian, a Jew and a Beta Israel and his personality reflected this complicated identity, as can be seen through his rich correspondence with Faitlovitch and others, mostly written in Italian, which I published in 2000.[52]

In conclusion, he is a key figure in the history of Ethiopian Jewry but one who still remains almost completely unknown, even to the Jews of Ethiopia who migrated to Israel, the country where he is buried but where no tribute to him can be found.

Emanuela Trevisan Semi is Senior Researcher in Modern Hebrew and Jewish Studies at Ca' Foscari University in Venice, she has been coordinator of the European MA Erasmus Mundus in *Crossing the Mediterranean towards investment and integration* (MIM). She has published many books and articles about contemporary Jews, Karaites, Ethiopian Jews, Moroccan Jews, Judaizing movements and about memory and diaspora issues. In recent years she did research about contemporary lifewriting of Morocco Jews. She has published, among others: *Les caraites un autre judaisme* (2013); (with Tudor Parfitt) *Judaising movements* (2002); *Jacques Faitlovitch and the Jews of Ethiopia* (2007); (with Hanan Sekkat Hatimi) "*Mémoire et représentation des juifs au Maroc: les voisins absens de Meknès"* (2011); (with Dario Miccoli, Tudor Parfitt) *Memory and ethnicity, Ethnic museums in Israel and Diaspora* (2013); *Conversioni all'ebraismo* (2016); *Taamrat Emmanuel: An Ethiopian Jewish intellectual, between colonized and colonizers* (2018).

Keywords: Taamrat Emmanuel, Ethiopia, Beta Israel (Falasha), Italian Colonialism, Italian Jews

---

[51] Dominique Schnapper, *La citoyenneté à l'épreuve, la démocratie et les juifs* (Paris: Gallimard, 2018), 208.

[52] Trevisan Semi, *L'epistolario.*

How to quote this article:
Emanuela Trevisan Semi, "Between Italy and Ethiopia, Western and African Judaism: the story of Taamrat Emmanuel, a Jewish intellectual from Ethiopia," in "From the Other Shore: Transnational Jewish Journeys Along Africa's Shores," ed. Marie-Pierre Ulloa, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC* 19 (June 2021), DOI: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/12538