

FROM ETHIOPIA TO ISRAEL: A CHILD'S JOURNEY

Raffi Berg

In the early 1980s, some 16,000 Ethiopian Jews (Beta Israel) left their homes under cover of darkness to walk hundreds of miles to Sudan, a secret gateway to Israel opened by the Mossad. It was a perilous journey, with the constant risk of being caught and killed. The trek was so gruelling that more than 1,000 of those who set off perished on the way. Here is the true story of one of the Jews, adapted from Raffi Berg's book *Red Sea Spies: The True Story of the Mossad's Fake Diving Resort*.

Benny Ghoshen was five and a half years old when he was collected from his bed by his parents late one night at their home in Adi Woreva. They had chosen Saturday night as departure time, as the Sabbath, when there was no contact between Jewish and Christian neighbours, had just concluded. They crept out of the village in a group of thirteen – the smallest children and elderly people carried on donkeys – and made their way down a valley to the Tekeze River. They went hastily, covering the 15 miles to the river in a day and a half.

Benny's parents had had to make the agonising decision that for the sake of their youngest children they would have to go without two of their older sons – one aged sixteen, who had been forced into the rebel Tigray People's Liberation Front, and another aged eighteen, who was working elsewhere as a teacher.



At the river they converged with Jews who had come from other villages as part of a plan to go en masse, until there were about 400 people walking together. They crossed the river, wading through on foot, or by horse or donkey. Some of the youngest children fell off into the water and had to be saved from drowning, but everyone eventually made it to the other side. After days and nights of more journeying – moving only after dark so as not to be seen – the group arrived at the Wolkait

mountain range. With the rugged escarpments rising thousands of feet above them, the tired throng began its long and difficult ascent. The crossing took days, stopping when it was light and carrying on at night. The terrain transformed, from lush and verdant to arid and barren, where it became a matter of survival.

Provisions of water were running so low that they started to ration portions to three bottle caps a day for children, and just one for adults. What little food they had left was also divided into morsels.

Weaker people in the group fell ill, and some died. Benny, who had been walking barefoot on scorching sand, was suffering from exhaustion, so was put on the back of a donkey. As they continued, the animals suddenly went wild and started to stampede. They had seen a small pool of water and, dying of thirst, charged towards it. As Benny's donkey ran, he was struck by the branch of a tree and fell off. He lay where he landed, showing no signs of life. Members of the group checked him but were convinced he was dead, another tragic casualty of the brutal trek. They decided to bury him and dug a grave, but the Jewish custom of ritual purity was so strictly observed by the Beta Israel that even in the desert they would not put a body in the ground unclean. With water from the pool, they started to wash him, whereupon Benny began to move. To the shock of everyone, the boy started crying. He had been knocked unconscious but the water brought him round. Picking him

up, the group carried on, and a few days later they reached the border town of Humera. It was too dangerous to cross in daylight, as they would get caught by Ethiopian soldiers. Accounts from Jews who made it to the border only to fall into the hands of Ethiopian patrols tell of beatings, torture and rape. They would be arrested for trying to leave the country illegally, get sent back to where they started and be slung into jail. Benny's group managed to get across under cover of darkness and headed to Gedaref.

Three months after leaving their village, they finally arrived at the refugee camp. Within days, Benny's family were smuggled out and driven 250 miles to Khartoum. Ferede got them passports and they were put on a flight to Marseille. There they switched to an El Al plane, and on 25 May 1980 they landed in Israel. As a child, Benny did not know what an aeroplane was, and would playfully throw stones at the sky whenever one flew overhead. By the age of 30, he was a major in the Israeli Air Force.