The Maharis

MELODY AMSEL-ARIELI

talks to her adopted family about how they cope with life in Israel

The Mahari family arrived in Israel in a covert military operation of almost Biblical proportions. Ambajio, a son who had arrived years earlier, rushed from his army base to greet them in their Beersheba apartment. He found young and old alike huddled together in a corner, completely exhausted and completely bewildered. As if their traumatic flight was not enough, they had been issued gas masks the moment they set foot on Israeli soil. They had arrived at the height of the first Gulf War. Yet the Maharis remember those moments not with fear but with great joy. Grandfather Tagay Desei, patriarchal in his flowing robe, smiles, "My lifelong dream had come true. What more could I ask?"

The Maharis soon realised, however, that modern day Israel was not the 'Jerusalem' of the Bible, the Land of Milk and Honey. As observant Jews, they had not expected Israel's blatantly secular way of life. Nor had they expected terror attacks. Finally, while they no longer thought the entire world was black, they had not expected to be so few among so many.

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Hebrew fluency remains a continuing problem among older Ethiopian Jews although Desei's daughter Yambol, who had never learnt to read or write, has, with great effort, mastered a basic Hebrew vocabulary. "Hebrew is still difficult for me to understand," she explains, "but it is almost impossible to get along without it". Although Yambol, a widow, has tried mightily to retain her parental authority, her children, fluent Hebrew speakers all, have usurped much of that role. From an early age, they have translated bills and letters, accompanied her to doctors and social workers, and attended younger siblings' parent-teacher meetings.

Their grandfather too laments, "After 20 years in Israel, I still cannot understand or speak a word of Hebrew. I can barely talk to my own grandchildren". Nor can they understand him. Indeed, in gathering facts for this article, teenage Warkenash relied on older siblings, those educated in Ethiopia, to translate both her mother's and grandfather's responses.

Desei feels helpless before grandchildren who read and dream in Hebrew, who embrace modern wonders like computers and cellular phones. "In Ethiopia," he reminds them, "I was a learned man, I translated Ge'ez (an ancient tongue used specifically for prayer) for the multitudes. I was respected. My fields yielded corn, sugar cane, beans, peas, and grain. My beehives overflowed with honey. My goats, cows, and sheep thrived and everything I touched was blessed and multiplied." Growing emotional, he raises himself from the living room couch. "But here I do nothing and have nothing. I am no one."

Though his authority has waned, Desei still maintains his age-old traditions. "I see no need to change anything at all," he insists. Yambol, though she still wears the Ethiopian cotton dress, sash, and cloak, is more realistic. "My children are no longer meek and respectful. They speak Hebrew, eat Israeli food, wear modern clothes, and use Israeli names. They want to be Israeli. And sometimes, we do too. We even celebrate Chanukah, a holiday that was unknown to us in Ethiopia, just to be like everyone else."

Yambol's eight children, who range from age 15 to 39, are all bravely making their way in a white world. Alamitu is a high school freshman. Fiery Warkenash dreams of becoming a criminal lawyer. Avraham, after a minor run in with the law, is now, happily, self-sufficient and productive. Pilugu works as a security guard while studying to be a medical secretary. Newly-wed ShaSha, who recently took a degree in special education, mentors teens at risk. Tikva and Marta both raise families and work. And Ambajio, the oldest, is a highly decorated soldier and a police detective. On paper, they indeed seem to be just like everyone else. "But strangely enough," says their mother, "though my children feel Jewish, they don't feel Israeli. They feel Ethiopian".

No wonder. Because the Maharis live in an Ethiopian enclave of Beersheba, they have limited contact with other ethnic groups. Even when they venture to the town's outdoor market or other public areas, few whites take any notice of them, much less talk to them. And if they do communicate, it may be through barbs and skewed glances. So how does a high-schooler cope? Warkenash, when confronted, usually responds with nobility, simply declaring her persecutors 'uneducated'. But once, as she passed several white girls her age, Warkenash tossed her head, and said, "They're staring at me as if I came from Africa!" Then she caught herself and burst into laughter. "Well, I did come from Africa."

Visiting the Maharis, our adopted family, is always a pleasure, with traditional greetings, kisses left-right-left, then gossip and news over steaming cups of Ethiopian coffee. The TV set, which dominates their living room, is usually tuned to an Israeli channel, but with its sound turned off. Though they watch the news, they do not hear a word. But things are changing. Today Cable TV offers an all-Amharic station, which broadcasts through the evening hours. For the first time, Yambol will be able to follow the news, learn about health care, and hear Ethiopian leaders and lawyers. Maybe, finally, she will feel Israeli, just like everyone else.

Photo: Desei, ShaSha, Warenkesh (holding a festive bread for Rosh Hashana), Yambol.

ShaSha and Gatchio chose wedding invitations featuring both Amharic and Hebrew script. Their courtship, too, reflected a delicate balance between Israeli and Ethiopian traditions.

Rather than meeting through an arranged marriage, ShaSha and Gatchio met by chance, Israeli-style. But early on, bowing to tradition, the couple sought approval of the religious leader of the Ethiopian-Israeli community. Kes Yosef, a living treasure, has committed the genealogy of the entire Ethiopian Jewish community to memory, unto the seventh generation. After determining that ShaSha and Gatchio were "of good stock", he searched for even the most remote familial relationship between them, a daunting task, as many Ethiopian families are intertwined many times over. Happily, he found that ShaSha and Gatchio, over the last 150 years, shared no common ancestors. Their wedding was on.

In the Ethiopian highlands, weddings followed a traditional script. First the families arranged their children's union, agreeing on a bride-price, either a herd of sheep or a considerable amount of money. Some four months before the happy event, the women of the village began preparing the wedding feast from scratch, including enough beer, delicacies, and sweets for hundreds of expected guests. Finally, quantities of sheep were slaughtered for the feast. On her wedding day, the bride, usually still in her teens, was led, blindfolded, astride a horse to the ceremony. Only

ShaSha's Wedding

then, under the canopy itself, was her blindfold removed, revealing, for the first time, her husband-to-be.

ShaSha and Gatchio, who have known each other for five years, married at a fashionable Beersheba 'wedding garden', under a canopy suspended over a romantic 'lagoon'. In lieu of a horse and blindfold, ShaSha's family sent her off in a flurry of pink rose petals. And after the ceremony, performed by an Orthodox rabbi, ShaSha and Gatchio braved a very modern tunnel of sizzling silver sparklers.

Some 600 guests attended, a modest turnout for Ethiopians, whose families are blessed with many children. While most of the men dressed informally, the women were in their full glory. Most of the older ones wore traditional white robes, their heads loosely draped with white gauzy scarves. Their only adornments, heavy gold earrings and pendants brought with them from Ethiopia, set off their fine features. Their Israeli-born daughters, on the other hand, chose bright turquoise, peach, or yellow confections, which complimented their dark complexions and many accented their corn-rowed hairdos or masses of black curls with filigreed golden chains.

The musicians, Ethiopians all, tuned up nasal-sounding stringed instruments called masenkos, and, to the beat of a decidedly Israeli synthesizer, swung into action. Despite the ear-splitting amplification, or perhaps because of it, their pounding rhythms lured guests onto the dance floor as surely as moths to a flame. Massing around the bride and groom, forming loose circles, men facing men, women facing women, everyone began to dance. But there was nothing modern here, no hip-hop or rap. Except for an occasional flirtation with reggae-style rhythmic patterns, the musicians stuck with traditional tunes. And the crowd responded enthusiastically, Ethiopian-style, shoulder-shimmying: standing motionless while shaking their shoulders east-west, north-south, to and fro. Putting reticence aside, even non-Ethiopians, responding to the beat and good cheer, jumped in and gave it a whirl.

ShaSha and Gatchio's tale began centuries ago in the Ethiopian highlands. Within their lifetime, it reached modern Israel, a continent and light years away. Now, with their marriage, their tale will continue for generations to come.

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Find out More

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Lectures

Narratives of the Ethiopian Jewish Exodus
Gadi BenEzer gives the Sherman Lectures at Manchester University, 16-19 April. See WHAT'S HAPPENING pages 28 & 29

'FATHER' AND 'SON'

Melody Amsel-Arieli tells the story of how her family adopted the Maharis

Years ago, Mickey Arieli, a gung-ho Zionist, left his family in the US, immigrated to Israel to join the Israeli Paratroopers. Mic, dubbed a 'lone soldier', had no home in the country, nowhere to go on Shabbat, no place to wash his laundry, cook his meals, or relax. Yet somehow he managed, either by crashing a friend's dorm or bunking in a hostel. But he swore that someday he would 'adopt' a soldier himself.

When he finally had a family of his own, Mic, with the blessing of the Israeli Armed Forces, 'adopted' Ambajio. The very first time that Ambajio slept over, Mic, who rose to find him reading to his children, realised that he would be not only be giving of himself but also receiving. And Ambajio, who was then serving in the Givati Combat Unit (the equivalent of the US Marines) in Lebanon, no longer had to bear his battle experiences alone. Mic, who attended all of Ambajio's army ceremonies, swelled with pride the time his 'son' received the Outstanding Soldier Award. Little did he know that Ambajio, taking advantage of this golden opportunity, had asked his commanding officer for a special prize – to parachute with his father. So poor Mic, who hadn't jumped in 30 years, had no choice but to oblige.

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