December 2010/Tevet 5771

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Ethics
Sigi Ziering

This year, our Sigi Ziering column focuses on the ethics of immigration. Each month, an esteemed guest columnist wrestles with what Jewish texts and our tradition teach us about our neighbors and ourselves. Each month, we peer into the immigration debate raging in America; we'll also look into immigration issues and the lives of undocumented workers in Israel. This column is sponsored by Bruce Whizin and Marilyn Ziering in honor of Marilyn's husband, Sigi Ziering, of blessed memory. Visit shma.com to view the series and responses.

The Right to Be Israeli: Race in Israel

KAREN PAUL-STERN

The Ethiopian *aliyah* to Israel that began nearly 20 years ago has posed ethical problems for Israel like no other immigration wave. With more than 100,000 Ethiopians living in Israel today, some already second generation, the community continues to face numerous absorption and assimilation challenges. First, there is the very question of who is a Jew within the Ethiopian community itself. A number of Ethiopian immigrants are considered to be "Falash Mura," or now-Christian Ethiopians who have an ancestry rooted in Judaism. Yet they came to Israel as part of a wave of Jewish immigration and, despite continuing questions about their lineage, they now live in Israel and deserve the same treatment as any other immigrant group.

This debate points to the most burning immigration question in Israel today: Who has the right to become an Israeli citizen? If one is not Jewish, no channel exists through which to become naturalized. As Israel transitions into a multicultural, multiracial society, this question may become one of the great issues of debate in Israel in the 21st century. While Israel has always been a democracy, the very concept of democracy may now be under siege.

"Who is a Jew" may soon become "who is an Israeli?" Israel's Law of Return — which grants automatic citizenship to any Jew who wishes to live in Israel — is being questioned in the 21st century in ways never intended by Israel's founders. Questions of immigration and citizenship extend beyond the Ethiopian community. Russian *olim*, foreign workers, and other immigrants, including Palestinians, all require clearly articulated policies.

Finally, the elephant in the room regarding the Ethiopian community is race. For the first time in modern Israeli history, there has been an enormous influx of immigrants who stand out not just because they stumbled into a new country with new ways but because their skin is dark. It is black. They are foreign in Israel in a way that no one has been foreign before.

Racism in Israel today is often linked to the Jewish-Arab conflict. It is manifest at soccer games, where anti-Arab epithets are sometimes hurled onto the field by the mostly Jewish fan base.

But another form of racism exists in Israel today, one that more closely mirrors the racism that Americans recognize.

When an employer in Israel sits across the desk from an applicant who happens to be Ethiopian, does the employer see only a potential employee, or does he or she see a person with black skin? Why would three religious schools in Petach Tikvah refuse to accept Ethiopian students? How does Israel account for the enormous gaps in education and employment in the Ethiopian community nearly 20 years after the first large *aliyah*?

A new generation of Ethiopian children is already reaching adulthood in Israel. They did not grow up in refugee camps in the desert; they are modern and engaged, and they want to live their lives well and proudly in the country that claimed it wanted them.

They are forcing Israel to face questions of immigration that it has never before encountered. Who should be allowed to immigrate? Who is Israeli? And what is a country's responsibility to a population that was brought to its shores because of a decades-old contract with its conscience, but for whom the questions of absorption and assimilation involve intractable questions of identity and skin color?

Karen Paul-Stern is the Washington regional director of the New Israel Fund, as well as a development and fundraising consultant to progressive non-profit organizations. A writer, her work has appeared in *Lilith* Magazine, the *Washington Post, Red Wheelbarrow Literary Magazine, Scribblers on the Roof,* and *Washington Jewish Week.* She writes a weekly blog on the intersection of work and parenthood for *Current Mom.*