

Melanie Lidman

Second Day of Passover

April 12, 2017

Thank you so much to the Temple Emunah community and Rabbi Lerner for having me here. I'm so honored to be here again this year to continue the Passover tradition, especially because it means I'm a little bit closer to having my mom forgive me for missing Passover last year.

I swear, it was for a good cause. Last year at this time I was at the largest *seder* in the world: nearly 3,000 Ethiopian Jews in Gondar, Ethiopia, part of the community left behind when the Israeli government announced the end of Ethiopian *aliyah* in 2013.

Every year, we say the same words at the end of the Passover *seder* – *L'Shanah Haba'ah B'Yerushalayim* – Next Year in Jerusalem! Most years, the words signify the end of a long meal and the start of the clean up, our minds already racing towards getting the wine stain out of the good tablecloth and the *matzah* crumbs out of the carpet.

But those words have an entirely different meaning for the approximately 9,000 Jews still living in Ethiopia who could not

previously come to Israel because they are not considered Jewish under the Law of Return.

In the chaotic bureaucracy that marked the Ethiopian *aliyah* – from heroic, clandestine airlifts in the 1980s and 1990s, to the heartbreaking waiting process that continued until 2013 – many families got separated, paperwork got lost. As children hit age 18, they required separate approval from their parents, increasing the difficulties. Mothers waited decades for older children to join them in Israel, and vice versa.

The Jewish Agency announced in 2013 that all of the Ethiopian Jews were in Israel, a story most of the Israeli public believed. But imagine how that announcement must have felt to the approximately 9,000 people who identify as Jewish, still living in Ethiopia?

The Israeli government claims this community isn't ethnically Jewish. The Jews left behind in Ethiopia are Falashmura, a derogatory term for Ethiopian Jews whose ancestors converted to Christianity, often under duress, generations ago. Falashmura are not considered eligible for Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return, which requires at least one Jewish grandparent and disqualifies someone who

has converted to another religion, even if the conversion happened a long time ago.

But who is a Jew? And who gets to decide who is Jewish? Once you hear the stories, once you see their synagogue and the fervency of the community's prayers, the way they stand up and shout, rather than sing, the national anthem of *Hatikvah* at the end of every prayer service, no doubt remains as to whether this group is Jewish. A regular weekday *Shaharit* service attracts an average of 1,000 people.

Over the past three years, I've traveled extensively in Africa for my work as a journalist with *Times of Israel* and *Global Sisters Report*, a news website about Catholic nuns. I've followed bumpy unpaved roads to remote synagogues with packed dirt floors and well-worn prayer books. I have seen Judaism flourishing in the most unlikely places in rural Africa, people who feel a deep connection to this religion, regardless of the politics.

I've visited synagogues and isolated Jewish communities in Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Zambia. They have ranged from the large, established synagogue in Gondar, which can seat 3,000 people for a seder, to a plastic sheet wrapped tent in the highlands of Kenya. Shucking and praying

over red dirt floors, *tallit* fringes brushing against hand-shorn benches. I've welcomed the Sabbath in Hebrew interwoven with Luganda, Swahili, Amharic, Twi, and Wiaso.

Some of these Jewish communities, like the Sefwi Wiaso in Ghana, claim a genetic tie to Judaism, believing their tribe descended from Moroccan Jewish traders who settled in Ghana hundreds of years ago. Others, like the Kasuku community in Kenya, decided to become Jewish after a long spiritual journey. The Abayudaya community in Uganda has been practicing Judaism for over 100 years, after their warrior leader decided to convert in 1920.

As someone who grew up in a synagogue that was mostly homogenous Ashkenazi Jews, with perfect little balls of *gefilte* fish on toothpicks at the *kiddush*, I have been thrilled and humbled to see the diversity of Judaism (though *gefilte* fish remains popular among Jewish communities everywhere.)

But one thing that has struck me, again and again, both in my travels and especially in Israel, is the question of who gets to decide. Who gets to decide who is a Jew? Who gets to decide what it means to be Jewish? Who gets to decide what conversions are acceptable, and what conversions are not? Who gets to decide how we can celebrate at the Western Wall

or other holy sites? Who gets to decide where women can read the Torah? Who gets to decide who makes *aliyah* to Israel? Who gets to decide who can get married or who gets buried in a Jewish cemetery?

The *aliyah* question – who gets to move to Israel and receive citizenship under the Law of Return – is an especially political question. Israel must walk a fine line between throwing open its doors to Jews of every stripe and color, while ensuring that people aren't moving to Israel solely for economic reasons.

So when many politicians questioned whether the Falash Mura are “Jewish enough” to make *aliyah*, activists pointed to the massive immigration from the former Soviet Union, where more than 1 million people moved to Israel, many of whom were practicing Christians. “If we were blonde haired and blue eyed, we would have been in Israel years ago,” is a charge I heard often in the Ethiopian synagogue.

The questions in Israel of Jewish marriage, or burial, or who gets to read from the Torah at the Western Wall, are increasingly being controlled by the ultra-Orthodox in Israel, alienating secular Israelis from organized Judaism and the institutions that also belong to them.

Who gets to decide who is Jewish? Who gets to decide what it means to be Jewish?

When I wanted to make *aliyah*, it was a fairly smooth process that took less than a week to gather the necessary paperwork. My grandma and grandpa drove me, with my bicycle and two enormous duffle bags, to Newark Airport where I joined about 100 other Americans making *aliyah* on a *Nefesh B'Nefesh* flight.

For Ethiopian Jews, they have been waiting decades for the same right, as politicians quibble over budgets and children grow up without their parents.

Who gets to decide who is Jewish? Who gets to decide what it means to be Jewish?

The Judaism that I grew up with, the one that flourishes in synagogues like this one, is a Judaism of questions, of challenges, of arguments. Each *pasuk* of the Talmud doesn't have one interpretation, it has a cacophony of rabbis, yelling at each other through the centuries, talking on top of one another, building on or destroying each other's ideas in a rousing chorus of diversity. That is the Judaism I learned in this sanctuary. I know this is true because while cleaning my

childhood room for Passover, I found a stack of my old Hebrew School report cards, which were full of words like “argumentative,” “bright but difficult,” and “could be more respectful of teacher and others.”

And this is what we need, not just in Talmudic discussions over esoteric verses in the Torah, but over day-to-day life in Israel and the Diaspora. We need this chorus of dissent, people passionately (but respectfully) arguing their point of view, challenging each other, pointing out holes in their logic, building on each others ideals and beliefs.

Who gets to decide who is Jewish? Who gets to decide what it means to be Jewish?

The answer should be: no one and everyone. No one should have a monopoly on who gets to move to Israel, or who gets to read from the Torah, or who can celebrate the Jewish traditions.

Want to make Judaism great again? Educate yourself on these issues and become part of the conversation yourself. Women of the Wall, a pluralistic group of women who advocate for equal access for women at the Western Wall, has survived for nearly thirty years because of the support from

Diaspora Jewry – people like you who come to Israel and want to celebrate Judaism the way they know how, with egalitarian *minyans* and women leaders.

After a rollercoaster of a summer, where Ethiopian *aliyah* was approved and then not approved and then starting and yet not starting yet, on October 10, I stood at Ben Gurion airport with hundreds of expectant families. In the same room where, six years earlier, I received my Israeli citizenship, I stood and cried as I watched families who hadn't seen each other in 10 years come together with fierce hugs and ululations. 63 Ethiopians were reunited with their families in Israel.

According to an Israeli government decision, which took two years of political wrangling and a coalition crisis, approximately 100 Ethiopians are supposed to come each month. Guess how many have come after the initial flight, which was reported far and wide across Israeli media?

Zero. The Interior Ministry has thrown up fantastical claims, such as, “we don't have an office for interviews” or, once they were given a free office, “there's no air conditioning in the office.” They only sent people to begin the process of interviewing last month, three days before a large fact-finding mission of Members of Knesset.

Last year, when I came for Passover to Ethiopia, there was a sense of euphoria. The government decision to restart Ethiopian *aliyah* had just been passed and there was a real feeling that the words “Next Year in Jerusalem” was going to be true, for at least part of the community. Instead, the Ethiopian Jews are spending another year in limbo and turmoil, as the Israeli government passes over them once again.

North American Jewry was instrumental in bringing Ethiopian Jews to Israel in the 1990s. NACOEJ – the North American Committee on Ethiopian Jewry – was not without controversy, but they did incredible work getting Ethiopian Jews to Israel. Now the last Ethiopian Jews are counting on the international Diaspora community to come to their aid again. Get in touch with the Jewish political leaders – be it AIPAC, CJP, the Israeli American Council, or wherever you feel a sense of belonging – and tell them if this is an important issue for you. This is one of those rare instances where your voice is your most important tool. The Israeli government has already put the money aside. Now, they need to feel the pressure from Jews around the world.

I also wanted to provide a quick update to another issue that is close to my heart, an urban garden and community

center I help run at the Central Bus Station for the diverse communities of South Tel Aviv. So many members of Temple Emunah donated to a campaign last year called “All I want for my 31<sup>st</sup> birthday is a toilet,” which enabled us to put in said toilets and do a number of other renovations. We’re actually in the process of putting a plaque next to the bathrooms acknowledging our debt to Lexington, with the tentative words “For us, Temple Emunah is number 1!”

These renovations, including a joint conference with the Israeli Landscape Architecture Union, allowed us to throw open the doors to our community center. We now host a support group for GLBTQ African refugees, a Sudanese-Israeli YouTube channel, a community garden planning commission for the Tel Aviv Edible Forest, a number of artists’ groups with the Israeli Burning Man Festival, and a solar-powered DJ stand mounted on a tricycle. We still have a long way to go to ensure that the garden can stay open for more hours and serve more people in Tel Aviv’s poorest neighborhood. Recognizing that today is a holiday, if you’d like to continue supporting us for activities over the summer, I will include a link to the fundraising page at the end of this speech, which I think will go out over Emunah Talks.

Everywhere around the world, at the end of the seder, in Gondar, Ethiopia or Lexington, Massachusetts, you say,

*"L'Shana Haba'ah B'Yerushalayim"* – Next year in Jerusalem!  
But in Jerusalem, you say *"L'Shana Haba'ah B'Yerushalayim Habnuyah"* – Next year in a rebuilt Jerusalem!

I bless all of us, in our own ways, to help rebuild Jerusalem, to be part of the conversation to make it reflect the diversity of Judaism around the world. Because no one, and everyone, should get to decide who is Jewish, and no one, and everyone, should get to decide what it means to be Jewish.

So join with me now as we say together, *"L'Shana Haba'ah B'Yerushalayim Habnuyah!"*

**Onya Garden Fundraiser** - community garden in South Tel Aviv that I help manage (<https://www.generosity.com/volunteer-fundraising/help-the-onya-garden-blossom-this-summer>)

**Times of Israel articles** about Falashmura community in Ethiopia (<http://www.timesofisrael.com/topic/falashmura/>)

**Kulanu** - supporting Jewish communities around the world (<http://www.kulanu.org/>)

**Women of the Wall** - Egalitarian services at the Western Wall (<http://www.womenofthewall.org.il/>)

**Hiddush** - promoting pluralism in Israel (<http://hiddush.org/>)