

Exodus Interrupted

by [Jeff Rubin \(/experts/jeff-rubin\)](/experts/jeff-rubin)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

How an historic operation thirty years ago to save Ethiopian Jews succeeded -- and nearly failed.

Thirty years ago, Operation Moses became one of the most dramatic and successful chapters in modern Jewish history. Thousands of Jews from Ethiopia, an ancient community threatened by revolution and famine, were delivered to Israel in a remarkable, covert operation undertaken through the collaboration of the United States, Israel and Sudan. Today, nearly two generations later, the Ethiopian Jewish community is a vibrant piece of the Israeli mosaic, symbolized most famously by Yityish Aynaw, Miss Israel 2013.

But Operation Moses could have been a colossal disaster. If the rescue seemed to be the work of James Bond, the publicity that surrounded it seemed to be handled by Inspector Clouseau.

As families were being spirited to Israel, Jewish officials spread the word -- issuing press releases, speaking to groups and buying ads -- in an effort to raise funds. At the same time, these same officials asked journalists to sit on their stories for fear of jeopardizing the operation and endangering lives. And, indeed, botched publicity brought Operation Moses to a premature end, putting stranded Ethiopian Jews in peril. The Jewish community reacted in horror and dismay.

As a young journalist in 1984, I watched this tragedy of errors unfold, mistakes piling up like cars in a highway accident. When the mission was cut short, I interviewed many of the officials and journalists involved, but my story was spiked for fear of endangering the Jews left behind. Those interviews are being published here for the first time.

A Decision to Rescue

Ethiopian Jews had begun immigrating covertly to Israel in small numbers in the late 1970s, but as Ethiopia's economic and political situation deteriorated, they joined a flood of immigrants pouring across the border into refugee camps in Sudan. By the fall of 1984 Israeli Mossad operatives discovered that the Sudanese camps were

being overwhelmed by new Jewish refugees and they had to move quickly, as authors Mitchell Bard and Howard Lenhoff have written.

On Nov. 15, as rescue plans were being finalized, Ethiopian activists and top Jewish leaders from Israel and North America convened in Toronto at the annual General Assembly (GA) of the Council of Jewish Federations, a predecessor of the Jewish Federations of North America. At the GA, a small group of Ethiopian Jews and members of the Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jewry (CAEJ) mounted a raucous protest on the convention floor.

"I was at the U.S. State Department three weeks before the GA and I knew that there was a mechanism for the rescue set up," CAEJ founder Simcha Jacobovici explained. "I knew the Israelis were foot-dragging and I wanted to exert the final push for them to get started."

The JTA wire service reported on the GA confrontation in great detail, quoting then CJF president-elect Shoshana Cardin saying, "We are doing the maximum we can [to rescue Ethiopians] without jeopardizing anyone. But we cannot discuss what we are doing." Canadian television also reported on the demonstration.

With the consent of the Sudanese government, on Nov. 21, U.S. and Israeli operatives began nightly rescue operations, transporting Jews by bus from refugee camps to Khartoum, where they boarded jets to Belgium and their final destination, Israel. For the next seven weeks, as planeloads of Ethiopian Jews poured into Israel, the United Jewish Appeal (UJA) undertook an emergency campaign to raise between \$60 million and \$100 million for the resettlement of Ethiopian Jews in Israel.

At the GA, World Zionist Organization chair Aryeh Leon Dulzin told the delegates that Israel was about to embark on an historic rescue mission of a people long lost to active Jewish life. But he said the enterprise must remain a secret to succeed. A week later the WZO's American section issued a press release quoting Dulzin: "When the true story of the Jews of Ethiopia is told," it said, "we will take pride in what we have achieved in this most difficult and complete rescue operation."

A WZO official told me that the release was intended to boost UJA's campaign: "In the UJA campaign the whole story was being told off the record, sotto voce, for members of the *mishpocheh* [family] only to raise the money...At the time we thought it would be helpful for the UJA. As a matter of fact it was."

Phillip Ritzenberg, who was then the publisher of the *New York Jewish Week*, called the WZO statement "a rather coy little news release. It was as if it were an invitation to do a story; that the story was about to be announced; that the rescue was about to be announced."

Publicizing the Effort

On Nov. 23, 1984, the *Jewish Week* carried a front-page story on the rescue of Ethiopian Jewry. It was greeted by silence. Ritzenberg was surprised. "Our paper goes to every newspaper, radio station and television station in New York, but the story was simply invisible," he said. "It was completely ignored. In some senses this was disappointing because we knew that we had an exclusive story."

At the *New York Times*, the article contributed to the gradually emerging picture of a secret Israeli rescue mission. One week after the *New York Jewish Week* article, someone tipped off Warren Hoge, who was then the *Times* foreign editor. "We began checking around," said Hoge. "We have someone in Khartoum, someone in Addis Ababa, someone in Jerusalem, someone in Washington. We were able to find out that, indeed, it was true. A number of [our correspondents] said, 'Don't publish it because if you do you might jeopardize the operation.' We took the warning seriously."

The *Washington Jewish Week* was also checking on whether to publish a story. "No one told us that this is a case of life and death," said then-editor Charles Fenyvesi. "We didn't get the kind of call from a high source that would cause

us to hold the story -- no one from the State Department or the Israeli embassy. A lower embassy official telling us not to publish would not and did not suffice."

Seeing no response to the *New York Jewish Week* story, the *Washington Jewish Week* (a separate operation) ran its own article two weeks later with the headline: "An Ancient Tribe Returns Home, The Ethiopian Exodus Has Begun."

The *Washington Jewish Week* article put the *New York Times* in a difficult position, according to foreign editor Hoge. "When it came to our attention that the director of the Jewish Agency [for Israel] had given a speech about it and that it had been on the front page of two Jewish publications, one in Washington and one in New York, I thought that withholding the story had turned into suppressing the news. It was the discovery that it had become public that played the principal role in our decision." The *New York Times* carried a front-page article on Dec. 11.

Bernard Gwertzman, then a *New York Times* Washington correspondent, commented, "Jewish groups wanted it both ways: Full disclosure within the group but secrecy to the goyim [non-Jews]. But that ultimately breaks down."

H.D.S. Greenway, an editor at the *Boston Globe*, recounted a story told to him by former Israeli ambassador to the United States Simcha Dinitz: "Before leaving on a trip to Puerto Rico, Dinitz said that he was sworn to secrecy on the operation. But when he landed, a Jew came to pick him up and asked him, 'How's the operation going?' 'What operation?' asked Dinitz. 'Oh, you know, the Falasha operation. We all know about it but we're not supposed to say anything.'"

As the stories mounted, the Jewish Agency and the Israeli government held a joint press conference on Jan. 3, 1985, to issue an official version. Within 48 hours, the Sudanese government -- an Arab League member officially at war with Israel -- cut off the operation. While 7,800 refugees had been successfully evacuated, thousands more were feared stranded and in danger of losing their lives.

A firestorm erupted in Israel over the termination of Operation Moses, with the Jewish Agency and Israeli government officials accusing one another of killing the rescue. Two opposition parties, Tehiya and Citizens Rights Movement, blamed the national unity government and introduced separate no-confidence motions in the Knesset. Both motions were later withdrawn. Shimon Peres, then Israel's prime minister, would later explain to the Knesset that he had authorized the press conference "to focus attention where it should be and to divert it from delicate aspects, and to put matters in their proper perspective. Both the restraint and the publication were designed to serve the same objective."

On March 28, 1985, Operation Sheba, a U.S.-sponsored follow-up mission, rescued the 494 Jews who remained in the Sudanese refugee camps. Prime Minister Peres met them on the tarmac when they arrived at an airport outside Eilat.

Thousands of Jews remained in war-torn Ethiopia. Six years later, as the government of President Mengistu Haile Mariam was about to fall, Israel and the United States mounted Operation Solomon, a lightning operation that rescued 14,325 Ethiopian Jews from Addis Ababa in a single 36-hour period. Unlike Operation Moses, the 1991 mission brought Jews directly from Ethiopia to Israel and was accomplished under a total news blackout.

Lessons Learned

Operation Moses left an indelible imprint on community leaders. Malcolm Hoenlein was then the director of the New York Jewish Community Relations Council, an organization that had worked to gain acceptance for Ethiopian Jews and which was close to the frontline agents who undertook Operation Moses. "We were not involved in the fundraising," Hoenlein remembers. "Of course it was a very attractive issue to fundraise around, the emergency airlift of endangered Jews. We had a very serious debate over what to say publicly. Nobody wanted to jeopardize the lives of the Jews."

Now the executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, Hoenlein believes that "you have to be guided by the people on the ground who publicity most affects," adding, "You always have to strike a balance between the short-term loss of publicity for the long-term gain. Sometimes you can't even publicize something after it's over because you don't know when you will have to do it again."

Will Recant became director of the American Association for Ethiopian Jewry soon after Operation Moses. "You can never jeopardize a life for publicity," he says. "You have to keep the number of people who have information small and information must be shared carefully." Recant has put this lesson to good use in the last 25 years as a staff member with the JDC, currently as assistant executive vice president.

Recant adds that Operation Moses also contributed significantly to a global awareness of Ethiopian Jewry, both those in Israel and those who remained in Ethiopia. "Even [former refusenik Natan] Sharansky referred to Ethiopian Jews as fellow Prisoners of Zion when he was released from the Soviet Union," Recant says.

In 1985, John Ruskey was running the education program at the 92 Street Y. The image of black Jews pouring into Israel forever reshaped the way he and his generation thought about Jewish identity. "It made us reconsider the meaning of Jewish diversity," says the former executive vice president of the UJA-Federation of New York. "Today we celebrate Jewish diversity of all types...It began then."

Jeff Rubin is director of communications at The Washington Institute. This article originally appeared on the [New York Jewish Week website \(http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/international/exodus-interrupted\)](http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/international/exodus-interrupted). ❖

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