

A FELASHA OF ETHIOPIAN LIGHT **IAN HARRIS and JANE WORMLEIGHTON**

A short drive from Gonder, in Northern Ethiopia, is the small and unusual village of Weleqa. Unusual, because this village used to be home to a substantial Felasha population (Ethiopian Jews) before most of those people were airlifted to Israel. Unusual also, because Weleqa retains some relics of that Jewish past. Or does it? Nothing in Ethiopia is straightforward and its Jewish past and present is no exception.

For a start, Ethiopians do not like the term Felasha to describe their Jews. The term means “exile” in the Ethiopian language Amharic; a left over from a long bygone era when Ethiopian Jews were not allowed to make permanent communities. Ethiopians prefer the term “Bet Israel” to describe their Jews. And if that phrase sounds “too Jewish to be true” you’d better believe it.

Most Ethiopians are Semitic people by origin and Ethiopia’s official language, Amharic, is a Semitic language. Many Amharic words are fraught with difficulty to the Western mouth – the word for “thank you” is an unabbreviateable and unpronounceable word: “amaseygenalu” - but many religious words sound like Hebrew. Ethiopians call Easter “Pesach” for example.

Indeed, the ancient Ethiopian Orthodox Church is about as Jewish as Christianity gets, with dusk to dusk timekeeping, a mild form of kashrus, regular fasts and a replica Ark of the Covenant as the cornerstone of any official place of worship. Indeed, there are many experts who believe that the Bet Israel people are not really Jews by ancient origin, but a group of Ethiopian Christians who made the relatively easy transition from Ethiopian-style Christianity to Judaism some centuries ago.

Into this web of intrigue your intrepid British reporters entered the Weleqa village, warned by our Ethiopian guide, Dawit (David), that all the Bet Israel people have now gone and there is not much to see. The village is now populated by Christian villagers, although we quickly ascertain from one young villager, Martha, that the village was always part Christian, part Jewish. Martha tells us that she herself is part Jewish and would like to go to live in Israel, where she has many cousins. A diplomat in the making, Martha tells us in English that the airlifted community are happy in Israel and that most of the Jews and part-Jews remaining in Ethiopia want to go to Israel. She also tells Dawit in Amharic that many of the Bet Israel people are unhappy in Israel and want to return to Ethiopia.

There is a deconsecrated synagogue and a Jewish graveyard in the village. Martha and 15 other youngsters act as our unofficial guides for the brief tour. The deconsecrated synagogue is an empty hut in similar style to other huts in the village. The local tradition was for Church huts to be angular in shape and for Synagogue huts to be round, so round it was. The only other sign that it was a Jewish place of worship is the Star of David motif in the central pillar. This is (just) discernable from the photograph. In Churches they use a cross effect instead (one of our less surprising findings)..

The graveyard is a 10 minute hike through beautiful Ethiopian countryside and across a small dried-up river. All 16 youngsters accompany us there. We see the Christian graveyard on the near side of the dried-up river. The graves are basically piles of stones. Martha honestly informs us that the Jewish graves looked very similar to those on the Christian site before some overseas money (Israeli or American, she couldn't confirm) had the graveyard brought up to a Western Jewish standard.

An upgrade, but for the benefit of whom? A small band of rather wild looking youths tries to fend us off from the Jewish graveyard. They are paid a modest stipend to protect the graveyard (this foreign money again), but surely the guards and the graveyard are only there because some interested visitors might want to enter and see it? A small supplement to the guards' stipend secures our entry. The photographs show the tidy, colourful and unexpected scene we saw.

Back to the village and we had one final conundrum to solve before we could leave. In general, we don't like to give money or sweets to children; we believe the practice encourages children to follow tourists like us around and become touts. Where we know that the children attend school we do sometimes issue pens, but usually only under strict adult supervision. We had long since used up all of our pen supplies in Ethiopia, of course. But these children had been genuinely helpful, taken an interest in us in a positive and friendly way and had not tried to hassle us or tout. We discussed our conundrum with Martha and agreed a solution. We'd buy two pens for each child at the local store from the honest village shopkeeper who would look after us nicely.

One bright girl quickly wrote out a roll of all the children who have been with us (we could expect all the other kids from the village to try to muscle in on the action once we got back to the village). So we bought the pens, the roll was called and the children came forward in orderly fashion to collect their reward. In addition, although unsolicited, we gave a small monetary reward to Martha who had been so very helpful and informative.

When we finally left Northern Ethiopia on a flight to Addis Ababa, there was one final twist to our tale. An elderly lady sat on the plane next to our guide, Dawit. The two of them struck up a polite conversation in Amharic. (It sounds a bit like vociferous shouting, but that's polite conversation, believe us.) Dawit discovered that she is a Bet Israel lady, returning to visit friends and family in the old country. We asked her a few questions through Dawit (she, for one, likes her new home in Israel) and handed her over to the professional American journalists for questioning. But this is Ethiopia - after a couple of weeks you learn to expect the unexpected.