
Colloquium. Jacques Faitlovitch and the Jews of Ethiopia: a century

March 10-11, 2004, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv

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Jacques Faitlovitch and the Jews of Ethiopia : a century
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To mark the centennial, day for day, of Jacques Faitlovitch's first trip to discover the Falashas¹ (Jews of Ethiopia) the Centre de Recherche Français de Jérusalem in collaboration with Ben-Zvi Institute and Tel-Aviv University (Department of Middle Eastern and African History) organized a conference titled *Jacques Faitlovitch and the Jews of Ethiopia : a century*. In fact, it is a young masters' student from Tel-Aviv University, Haïm Admor, who took the initiative to plan this colloquium. More than three years ago, Haïm Admor endeavored to inventariate and catalog the precious documents of the Jacques Faitlovitch collection housed at the Sourasky central library of Tel-Aviv University. Well before him, world-renowned ethiopianists, such as Stefan Strelcyn and Max Wurmbrand, had already looked at these documents brought back from the numerous trips Faitlovitch had made to Ethiopia, but none of them had left us a complete catalogue. Since 1969, an Israeli researcher, Itzhak Grinfeld, who knew Amharic, Geez, French, Hebrew and Polish, among other languages, was asked to catalog the documents ; however, neither did he complete this task. Beyond the importance of this collection for Ethiopian studies, it is to Faitlovitch's person, one of the most important figures in Ethiopian Jews's history, that this conference is dedicated to.

Often called the « father of the Falashas », Jacques Faitlovitch is a man who certainly devoted his life to the cause of his « Black brethren » who lived in Abyssinia and who, indirectly, contributed to their immigration to Israel. Born in Lodz in 1881, he leaves to study in Paris and specializes in Semitic languages, in particular with Joseph Halévy, professor of Geez at the Sorbonne. Under the influence of Halévy, his

¹ The name Falasha is considered pejorative by the members of the Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel, even though Faitlovitch and other researchers of his time used this term in their writings to designate this group which called itself Beta Esra'el, « the house of Israel ».

master who had already made a trip to the Falashas², he becomes impassioned with these distant Jews and leaves in 1904 to meet them, financed by the baron de Rothschild. Faitlovitch wrote his first report upon his return³ and left again in 1908, writing after that a detailed book⁴. He went eleven times to visit the Falashas and brought back dozens of Falasha manuscripts, objects and books ; he wrote reports which still remain a source of ethnographic information for researchers today. But more than all, Faitlovitch gave himself as a mission to « normalize » the Falashas's pre-Rabbinic Judaism and endeavored to encourage a local élite by sending young boys to study in Europe and return to teach in the villages. Finally, he created pro-Falasha committees and mobilized the international community to encourage the immigration of this community towards what was then Palestine and later Israel. His dream was only realized 80 years after his first meeting with the Falashas, who began to emigrate en masse towards Israel at the beginning of the 1980's and 1990's.

The first day of the conference, which took place at the Ben-Zvi Institute in Jerusalem, was devoted to the period preceeding Faitlovitch's arrival among the Falashas, the controversies between Faitlovitch and his adversaries and the impact of his work. In a first session intitléd « Before Faitlovitch », Leonardo Cohen (Haifa University) presented a document from the Portuguese missionary Mendes which reports an audience given to a Jew named Salomon at Emperor Suseynos' court in 1627. Then Steven Kaplan (Hebrew University of Jerusalem) exposed the genealogy of the Flads, one of the most active Protestant missionary families among the Falashas since 1865 ; the parents, the children, their spouses their grandchildren and their respective spouses continued this proselytising activity until the middle of the XXth century. Finally, a paper on the figure of Joseph Halévy demonstrated that his Hungarian origins played an important role in the nationalist-Jewish vision (Y. Tsur, Tel-Aviv University) of this mentor of Faitlovitch. A second session focused on the controversy between Jacques Faitlovitch and rabbi Haïm Nahoum, who headed a counter-mission to demonstrate that the Falashas have no link to Judaism (H. Admor, Tel-Aviv University) and on the diverging interpretations between Jacques

² J. Halévy, 1869, « Excursion chez les Falachas, en Abyssinie », *Bulletin de la Société de géographie*.

³ J. Faitlovitch, 1905, « Notes d'un voyage chez les Falachas (Juifs d'Abyssinie) », rapport présenté à M. le baron de Rothschild, E. Leroux éd., Paris.

⁴ J. Faitlovitch, 1910, *Quer durch Abessinien; meine zweite Reise zu den Falashas*, M. Poppelauer Verlag, Berlin.

Faitlovitch and Aaron Aescoly concerning the religious practices of Ethiopian Jews (Yosi Ziv, Bar-Ilan University). Then E. Trevisan-Semi (University of Ca'Foscari, Venice) showed how the pan-hebraism of Faitlovitch and of N. Sloushtz as well as the *nidhe israel* discourse were prominent in the study of the Falashas ; S. Weil (Hebrew University of Jerusalem) discussed the Orientalist vision that Faitlovitch gave of his Ethiopian students, in particular through his photographs. In conclusion, L. Anteby-Yemini (CNRS, IDEMEC) finished with a paper on the franco-Ethiopian cultural and diplomatic relations and on the flourishing of Ethiopian studies in France which Faitlovitch also instigated.

The second day, which took place at the Department of Middle Eastern and African History of Tel-Aviv University, examined the link between Faitlovitch and Beta Israel culture as well as the documents of the Faitlovitch collection and ended with a tour of the actual collection and with a concluding lecture. A first session opened with a paper on the changes in the religious practices of the Ethiopian Jews under Faitlovitch's Rabbinical influence (M. Corinaldi, The Israeli Center for Academic Studies), followed by a paper on Beta Israel liturgy and its musical aspect (R. Atar, Bar-Ilan University) then on a presentation of Faitlovitch's book intitled *Proverbes abyssins* and their actuality today (H. Rosen, Israeli Ministry of Immigration and Absorption). A second session was devoted to the documents of the Faitlovitch collection, be it letters by Faitlovitch himself (A. Teffera, Hebrew University of Jerusalem), Geez manuscripts (B. Podolosky, Tel-Aviv University) or prayers specific to Beta Israel liturgy (M. Hayon, Schechter Institute), demonstrating the richness of the collection. In fact, a visit of the collection followed, presented by H. Admor and many participants could admire for the first time photographs of Emperor Menelik II or ancient Ethiopian amulets. Closing the conference, E. Trevisan-Semi (Ca'Foscari University of Venice) retraced the itinerary of Faitlovitch, from Lodz to Tel-Aviv, showing his constant search of a mystical Orient.

In brief, this conference, which was mainly aimed at scholars who worked, closely or distantly around the figure of Faitlovitch, attracted in fact a wide audience comprised of, among other, an ex-minister of Immigration and Absorption (Y. Tsaban), an ex-ambassador to Israel in Ethiopia, a number of Ethiopian scholars, members of Faitlovitch's family, grandchildren of Faitlovitch's first disciples now immigrated to Israel, *qesotch* (Ethiopian Jewish religious leaders) as well as young Ethiopian Jews who are beginning to be interested in their own history and will perhaps be leaders of a new generation of « indigeneous » researchers.

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