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'Falasha never more'

Had the rescue of more than 14,000 Jews of Ethiopia in 1991 been delayed by even one day, it is very likely they would have been killed in the ensuing chaos and brutality of the violent overthrow by rebel forces of the harsh, Marxist regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam.

But the rescue was completed on May 25.

Rebel forces overran the country the next day.

A mere 36 hours before, in the early hours of Friday, May 24, Israel mobilized a small armada of airplanes and the courage of its air force, other specialists and volunteers to safely bring to Israel the 14,325 Jews who had bravely assembled at the Israeli embassy in Addis Ababa.

"In terms of the dangers to the rescuers and to the people being rescued, it stands out in modern history," according to Asaf Agmon, the commander of the rescue operation.

Agmon's pilots flew three-hour, non-stop, back-and-forth flights between Israel and Ethiopia. They used 21 Hercules planes, 10 Boeing 707s and three El Al jumbo jets. The seats had been removed from all the planes in order to squeeze as many people as possible into the rescue vehicles.

Two babies were born on the planes.

The 20-year anniversary of Operation Solomon attests to the humanity of the Jewish state and to the life-affirming rootedness of its people.

Not since the days of Dunkirk in World War II, under vastly different conditions, have we seen so grand a gesture of self-sacrifice and moral action. But what other state in modern times has undertaken such a rescue? There is none to have tried, let alone to have succeeded. There is, and has been, only Israel.

In this edition of *The CJN*, author Judie Oron quotes a Jew who had been rescued from Ethiopia some time before Operation Solomon, who poignantly and powerfully tells us what Israel did for him and his family. "The [Israeli] embassy people gave me money and food and put my children in their school. I knew that here, finally, was a nation that would love us and help us!"

The word "Falasha" was used as a nasty, derogatory epithet by Ethiopians against the Jews of their land. It meant "stranger," or "unwelcome," or even "swine."

And as the songwriters of the Boston-based musical group Safam noted and sang with such glowing inspiration after the Jews of Ethiopia arrived in Israel, they were "Falasha never more." They were and are Beta Israel, of the House of Israel.

We are all of the House of Israel.

We must all note on our calendars, and remember in our hearts, those days of rescue 20 years ago, to ensure our children and grandchildren will know of it too.