

## Talk about exodus -- Yossi Vassa survived the real thing. He'll tell you all about it. Performer, some kin lucky they survived journey

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☐ FONTTwenty-one years after trekking 430 miles on foot with his family from northern Ethiopia to Sudan, then getting flown to Israel, **Yossi Vassa** is once again in a country of black people: Jamaica.

The Ethiopian Israeli is in Negril on a respite from touring "It Sounds Better in Amharic," and he's exhilarated. "You know, I've had these plans to go back to Ethiopia every year, but I've never gone back," **Vassa**, 30, says over the phone in a lilting Hebrew accent. "But Jamaica is the first place I've been where black people are organized together and running a place. It's kind of amazing to see it and be part of it."

As a black person living in a white country -- Israel -- **Vassa** can't avoid race. That subject, plus his incredible journey and subsequent assimilation into a strange country, are what he covers in his solo show, which he's performing this weekend at the Museum of the African Diaspora and four other Bay Area venues through Feb. 20. The show offers audiences a window into one of the more extraordinary chapters of Israel's Law of Return, which states that Jews anywhere in the world can come to Israel and automatically become full citizens.

Traditionally, Jews have emigrated from Europe and the Middle East, with some from the United States, Latin America and a few other areas. But in the 1970s, Israel authorities became aware of a community in Ethiopia that practiced Judaism. These people, known as Falash Mura or Beta Israel, claimed to have roots going back to King Solomon. Israeli rabbis decided that by law the Falasha should be invited into the Jewish homeland.

The decision led to two mass migrations, one in late 1984 and early 1985 called Operation Moses, which involved airlifting 6,500 Falashas out of Sudan refugee camps, and the other in 1991 called Operation Solomon.

**Vassa**, whose birth name is Anda Argi, says he was a happy kid living with his family of farmers in Uzava, northern Ethiopia. "There was a belief all along that one day we'll all be in Jerusalem -- that's what we called it, not Israel," **Vassa** says. "My parents, my ancestors, believed we had to live there because that is the Jewish land. It was a kind of dream, I think, but very close to the heart of all Ethiopian Jews."

The dream became reality when a few Israelis and Americans visited Uzava -- "the first white people I ever saw," **Vassa** says -- and announced that Israel was prepared to fly Falasha out of Sudan. The catch though, was that they had to get to Sudan, Ethiopia's northwest neighbor, on their own. At age 8 1/2, **Vassa** left with his parents, brothers, grandmother, other Falasha and several donkeys for the trek, which

took three months.

"The journey wasn't allowed by Ethiopia. Most of the time we walked at night and during the day we used to hide. There were robbers and soldiers on the way. We had a guide who knew the short ways and safe ways to Sudan. One night I was sleeping on a donkey. It was very, very quiet. The donkey got robbed while I was sleeping on it. They stole like 10 donkeys. We think the guide helped the robbers because he wasn't Jewish."

Subsisting on "special cookies called dabokolo," **Vassa's** clan arrived in Sudan in three months. That's when things got bad.

"It was a transit camp. We got a tent -- one tent for every two families. All of us were ill. There was no out, no in. The Sudanese hated us. There was no medicine. There was Red Cross, but it wasn't enough. The food was very bad."

Two of **Vassa's** brothers died, along with his grandmother. "But we were lucky," he says. "I saw entire families who died." **Vassa's** clan was stuck in the camp for nine months before the Israelis arrived. "And I know some families who waited longer, like three years."

In Israel, the family settled in Netanya, a rough town, but not atypical for immigrants of little means. It was a struggle to fit in, but **Vassa** says he thrived, eventually enrolling in Haifa University, where he started dabbling in theater. In the army, he performed as well. **Vassa** and a friend did a show for their fellow Ethiopians in Amharic, the language of Jews in that country. "My mother came. 'They pay you to do that?' she said. But you're just talking!"

Culture clash is the main theme of "Sounds Better in Amharic," which **Vassa** wrote with Shai Ben Atar and is produced by Israel's Nephesh Theater and presented in the Bay Area by San Francisco's Israel Center and Jewish Community Federation. The show deals with dating, learning math, watching TV, getting assigned a new name and other immigrant foibles. (For a sample of the show, log onto [nepheshtheatre.co.il/amharit\\_index\\_en.zhtml](http://nepheshtheatre.co.il/amharit_index_en.zhtml).)

**Vassa** has faith that his community ultimately will be accepted by Israel because of their shared religion. He's not so confident about racial harmony in the United States. "There's no talking about it between blacks and whites," he says. "It's like covered ... I don't know why."

As a black Jew in Israel, he's still trying to find his identity. "It's not easy. But I am very strong. I am very open and I am asking everything."

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It Sounds Better in Amharic: Solo show by **Yossi Vassa**. 1 and 4 p.m. Saturday and 12:30 p.m. Sunday at the Museum of the African Diaspora, 685 Mission St., San Francisco. (415) 358-7200; reserve at [www.moadsf.org](http://www.moadsf.org). 7:30 p.m. next Thursday, 145 Dwinelle Hall, UC Berkeley. (510) 845-7793. 8 p.m. Feb. 18, Congregation Shomrei Torah, 1717 Yulupa Ave., Santa Rosa. (707) 578-5519. 7:30 p.m. Feb. 19, Claremont Resort and Spa, 41 Tunnel Road, Berkeley; [www.jewishresearch.org](http://www.jewishresearch.org). 4:30 p.m. Feb. 20, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Library, San Jose State University, 1 Washington Square, San Jose. (408) 924-

6245.

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