



DON'T WE ALL WANT Geulah?

NEVER HEARD OF THE ANNUAL SIGD FESTIVAL? WELL, THERE'S ALWAYS NEXT YEAR TO JOIN IN THE FESTIVITIES OF THIS MAJOR YOM TOV FOR THE ETHIOPIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY.

IT'S THE DAY THEY REAFFIRM THEIR COMMITMENT TO HASHEM AND EXPRESS THEIR LONGING FOR MASHIACH. WITH SUCH AN AGENDA, WHO WOULDN'T WANT TO PARTICIPATE?



TEXT AND PHOTOS BY
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As we made our way to the Jerusalem Tayelet, the promenade skirting the Armon Hanetziv neighborhood with its breathtaking view of the Temple Mount, we met up with dozens of buses and a colorful mass of people. The air was festive, almost electric, full of holiday spirit — after all, it was Erev Rosh Chodesh Kislev, the 29th of Marcheshvan — the annual Sigd festival.

For the tens of thousands of Ethiopian Jews who had gathered (today there are over 100,000 Jews of Ethiopian descent in Eretz Yisrael), as well as the thousands of non-Ethiopians who had come to learn and observe, this was a day that the Ethiopian Jews have been observing for centuries, a festival expressing their longing to return to Jerusalem. As we were making our way toward the main area of the celebration, we overheard a young Ethiopian woman explaining to a group of tourists that as far as she and her friends were concerned, this was not just a holiday for Jews of Ethiopian origin, but one that all Jews could share in, for, as she explained, “Who doesn’t want the Geulah?”

Holiday Spirit

The month after Tishrei is typically viewed as bereft of Jewish festivals, and some people even homiletically interpret the name Macheshvan as “bitter Cheshvan” to indicate this lack. Yet for Jews of Ethiopian origin it actually contains a significant holiday. The Torah commands us to observe the holiday of Shavuot 50 days after Pesach. The Midrash (*Shir Hashirim Rabbah*) suggests that similarly, but for the impending winter weather, it would have been fitting for Shemini Atzeret to have been 50 days after Succot. The Jews of Ethiopia start the count five days earlier and observe the holiday of Sigd 50 days after Yom Kippur, on the 29th of Marcheshvan.

The name of the holiday, Sigd, is a Ge’ez (an ancient Ethiopian Semitic language used today mostly for ritual purposes) word. The root of the word means “to bow,” and is probably a cognate of the familiar word in Aramaic, “*lisgod* — to genuflect,” which is the source of the Hebrew/Arabic “*misgad/masjid* (mosque).”

There are other Hebrew/Aramaic words that the Ethiopian Jews have preserved from their distant past without understanding the

Hebrew origins. For example, they’ve always referred to themselves as “Beta Israel (the House of Israel).” While they lost the Hebrew language during their separation from the rest of the Jewish nation, they started out with the same Torah. However, it was written in Ge’ez and not the vernacular Amharic, and is called the “Orit,” which is similar to “*Oraisa*” — the Aramaic word for Torah.

In Ethiopia, Sigd was a major festival for the Beta Israel, themed on renewal of the covenant between the Jewish people, G-d, and the Torah (similar to what Ezra and Nechemiah did when the Jews returned from Bavel to Israel), as well as an entreaty to G-d to return them to the Land of Israel. This aspect included a communal introspection, following 50 days after the individual self-examination on Yom Kippur. They believed that in order for the exile to end and for them to return to Jerusalem they must be worthy. And while sins of individuals are forgiven on Yom Kippur, communal errors are atoned for on Sigd. While Sigd today in Israel retains the tefillos of the Sigd in Ethiopia, some of the messages and rituals have been adapted to the new circumstances.



Back in Ethiopia, throngs of Jews from the neighboring villages would climb to the top of a mountain and renew the covenant, yearning for Return. Today (right), Sigd is a state-recognized festival



Mishpacha

Secret Mission

Milling among this mass of Ethiopian Jewry, listening as the *kessim* led the services in Amharic, we recalled the many trips we’ve taken over the years to this African country. Our first trip was during the period following Operation Moses, an airlift spanning seven weeks, from November 1984 to the beginning of January 1985, in which — with the joint cooperation of the Mossad, the IDF, the American CIA, and the US embassy in Khartoum — some 8,000 Beta Israel who managed to flee on foot for refugee camps in Sudan during Ethiopia’s raging civil war were transported to Israel. In 1991, Operation Solomon brought another 14,000 Ethiopian Jews to Israel directly from Ethiopia within just 36 hours. In the interim, when we were first there, Sudan was still viewed as a potential escape route for the persecuted Beta Israel. But

because only the able-bodied were able to make the treacherous journey, many families were separated, as women, children, and the elderly stayed behind.

With the passage of three decades, we can finally reveal the following story. As young 20-somethings, we traveled to backwater Africa, where we found ourselves basically incommunicado, in an enemy country with no real contact with the outside world. We were sitting in a dark hotel room in the highlands of Ethiopia, our kosher food never made the flight, and for a week we had little to eat. The electricity was out and it was cold. This was 1987 and a vicious Marxist regime was in the middle of a civil war with Eritrea and several other rebel armies. Caught in the middle of the conflict were the Ethiopian Jews. An Ethiopian Jew had just slipped out of our room after showing

us the scars on the soles of his feet from being tortured by the police.

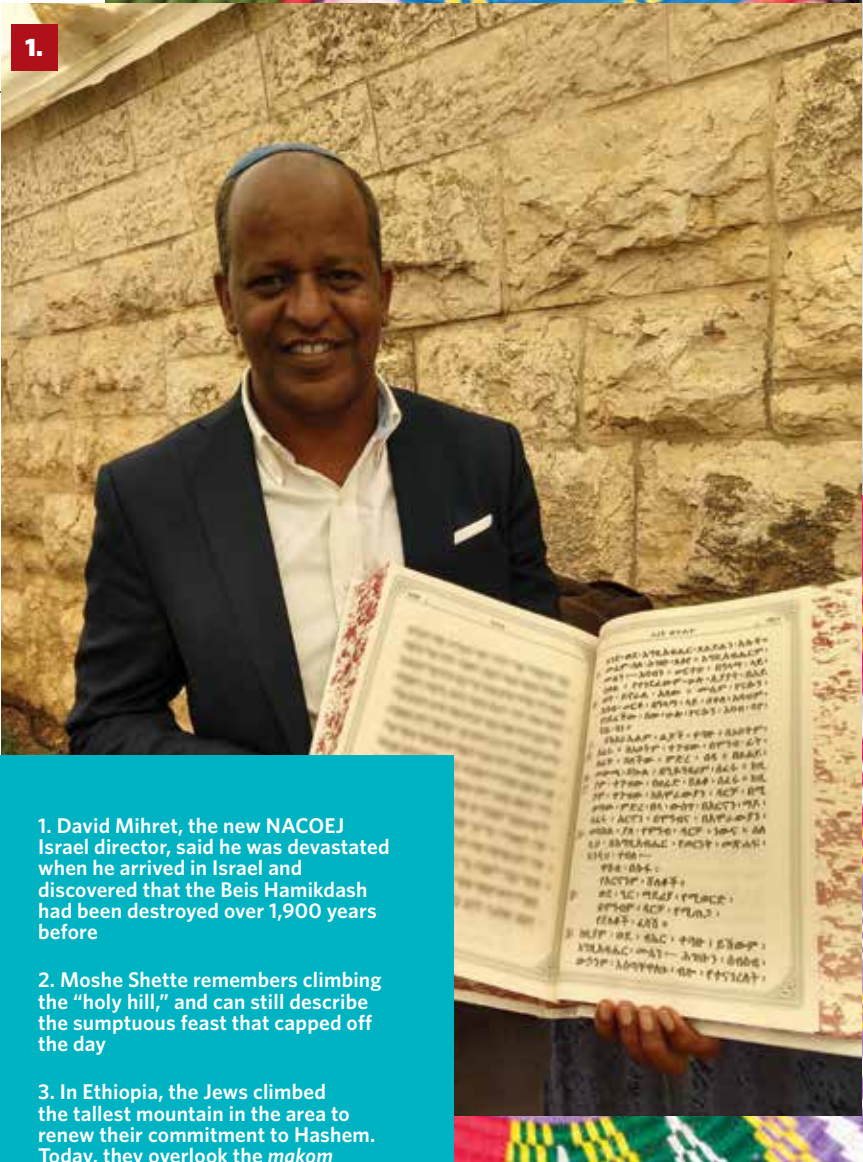
We were told to expect to be kicked out of the hotel as the Northern command was about to commandeer it, even though we had entered the country with American passports as tourists under the auspices of the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (NACOEJ). Our goal was to provide succor, advice, and emotional support. And while we didn’t get it at the time, we were also passing on information from the Mossad to let people know which places were safe and which ones weren’t as they fled to the desert in Sudan awaiting salvation by the state of Israel. Things were very bad, many were dying on the perilous journey, and there was little apparent light at the end of the tunnel. In fact, some estimates say 30% of those who fled passed away on their journey to Zion.

Overlooking the Dream

Like all Jewish holidays, this large, open air religious event has prayers as well as celebrations and a festive meal. The grassy area leading to where the prayer service was taking place was more like a huge, informal experiential and educational experience. NACOEJ had set up two large tents, and Shoshana Ben-Dor, NACOEJ's former Israel director and a world expert on Sigd, was explaining to curious onlookers the meaning of the holiday and, in particular, its prayers. She displayed a Hebrew translation of the prayers and discussed the content of the tefillos that were being recited. Another tent had images and the history of the rescue on the walls, and traditional Ethiopian injera and *dabu* breads were available. Schools and youth groups with large contingents of Ethiopians were taking a day off so that they too could experience Sigd.

David Mihret of Kiryat Gat, the new NACOEJ Israel director, was lugging around a huge Hebrew/Amharic Chumash. He was about 18 when he experienced his first Sigd in Israel, but what was even more impactful was his first visit to the Kosel. “On the one hand, I was ecstatic that I was finally there, after my people had been praying and dreaming for generations to be able to reach Jerusalem. Inside the Kosel Tunnels, when I reached the sign that reads ‘opposite the Kodesh Hakodoshim,’ I felt an incredible surge of connection to the Jewish people and to Hashem.”

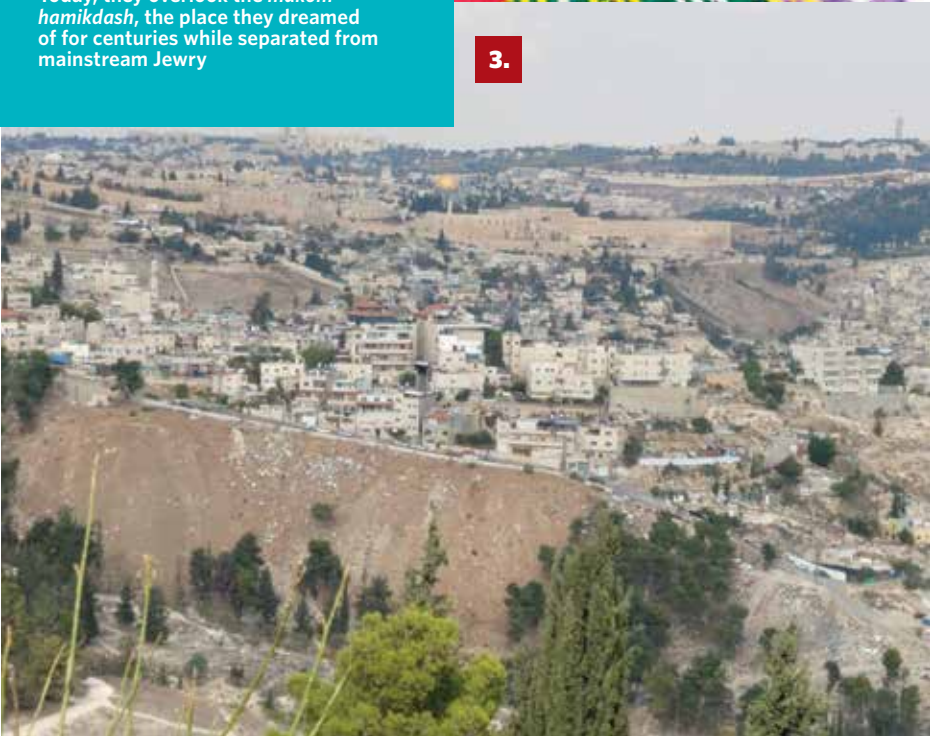
On the other hand, he said that standing there evoked a feeling of mourning. Growing up in Ethiopia, they longed to go to Jerusalem, not only because it was the Holy City, but because as far as they knew, the Beis Hamikdash was still standing. When they arrived in Israel and found out that the Beis Hamikdash had been destroyed more than 1,900 years before, it felt to them as if it had been destroyed right then. It is this deep connection to the Beit Hamikdash that made it crucial for the Sigd to be held at a spot from which they could see the Har Habayis.



1. David Mihret, the new NACOEJ Israel director, said he was devastated when he arrived in Israel and discovered that the Beis Hamikdash had been destroyed over 1,900 years before

2. Moshe Shette remembers climbing the “holy hill,” and can still describe the sumptuous feast that capped off the day

3. In Ethiopia, the Jews climbed the tallest mountain in the area to renew their commitment to Hashem. Today, they overlook the *makom hamikdash*, the place they dreamed of for centuries while separated from mainstream Jewry



Holy Hill

Moshe Shette, a young man with a *kippah* and *tzitzis* participating in the festivities with his son, had been the director of a local community center (*matnas*) in Ramle until the recent municipal elections, when he was elected to the Ramle city council. But his real pride, he said, is that his oldest son is learning in Yeshivat Sha'alvim. Overhearing our conversation, a group of American seminary girls asked if he could tell them what Sigd was like in Ethiopia. He made aliyah as a teenager, but he was happy to describe what he remembered. He explained how the holiday symbolized the community's desire to return to Jerusalem, and then, as if seeing the Sigd of his youth in his mind's eye, enthusiastically described his memory of climbing the “holy hill” together with the throngs of Jews from all the neighboring villages. He even described the tastes and smells of the sumptuous feast with which the day ended.

We knew what he was talking about. We'd been to such a hill on one of our trips to Ethiopia, when we were researching an area called Tigray in the north of the country. Most of the Ethiopian Jews were from the Gondar region, but about 15 percent were from Tigray. We found remnants of villages and cemeteries, and even met the last Jew of the Bet Mariah village. He told us about the holy mountain with the altar on top that the Jews used on Sigd. He described the steep climb and how the animals scurried along with the people. We decided to see it for ourselves, but, not appreciating the fact that we were already around 3,000 feet above sea level, the trek straight up the mountain just about killed us. We couldn't understand why we couldn't catch our breath while our local escorts effortlessly scampered up ahead of us. We eventually did make it up — and it was worth it just for the spectacular view of the plain below. We looked down at Bet Mariah on the bank of a river, just where all Jewish villages in Ethiopia were situated — the Beta Yisrael were very punctilious about mikveh and purity, and every Jewish village was near a stream or river (the non-Jews derogatorily referred to them as “the people who smell of water”). We found the altar and could only wonder at the thought of generations of Ethiopian Jews visiting this spot.

IVRI ANOCHI

Ethiopian Jews, the Beta Israel, had been separated from mainstream Jewry for so many centuries, that

when they reconnected, there were many significant differences. Nonetheless, any questioning of their Jewish status is offensive to them, as they have perceived themselves as Jews for over two millennia, having always stayed separate from their Christian neighbors. The origins of the Beta Israel have been lost in the mists of African time, with few written records. They themselves have two accounts: They are either descendants of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (or the entourage that accompanied their son to his mother's homeland), or they are from the lost tribe of Dan. Anthropologists have hordes of other suggestions as well, although none are provable.

The earliest mention of Jews in Ethiopia was in the fantastic tales of Eldad Hadani in the ninth century. While the veracity of his reports were questionable, Rav Tzemach Gaon of Sura ruled them to be reliable. In the 12th century, Benjamin of Tudela reported on Jews living across the Red Sea from Yemen (i.e. Ethiopia). In 1438 Elia of Ferrara reported meeting an Ethiopian Jew in Jerusalem, and in a letter written in 1488 to his father, Rav Ovadia Mi'Bartenura related meeting an Ethiopian Jew in Egypt. These reports clearly indicate that there was a distinctly identifiable group in Ethiopia who considered themselves part of the Jewish people and that their assertion was accepted by other Jews.

The status of the Ethiopian Jews was discussed by the Radvaz, the chief rabbi of Egypt in the 16th century, after a Jewish man in Cairo rescued and married a captive Ethiopian Jewess, after her town had been attacked and the men killed. They had a son together, who wanted to marry a local Jew. The Radvaz considered her Jewish and from the tribe of Dan, and thus the question, in his mind, was an agunah question related to the fate of her husband. In the end he ruled that the son could marry into the community, as long as he agreed to practice rabbinic Judaism. The Radvaz penned an additional teshuvah in which he stated that there was an obligation to redeem any Ethiopian of Jewish descent who showed up in the slave market. In 1921 Rav Kook wrote in support of sending teachers to Ethiopia; however, in 1954, in response to a Jewish Agency query, Chief Rabbi Herzog ruled that due to several halachic concerns, they should undergo conversion.

Rav Ovadia Yosef's position, however, was that they are Jewish and there was no need for conversion, although other contemporary *poskim* disagreed. Rav Moshe Feinstein, who expressed his pain upon hearing about racism toward the Ethiopian Jews and encouraged assisting them in light of the great sacrifices they've made for Judaism, nevertheless stated that they need a conversion to remove any doubts about their halachic status. The Tzitz Eliezer, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, and other *poskim* similarly required they convert, and the chief rabbinate thus initially ruled they should undergo a "*giyur l'chumrah*," which many of the earlier *olim* did.

In the last 20 years about 10,000 Falash-Mura, those whose ancestors converted to Christianity in the 18th and 19th centuries yet remained distinct from the local Christians, have moved to Israel and all of them are required to undergo full conversion.

Day of Atonement

Back in Ethiopia, the preparations for the holiday began days in advance. The Beta Israel were scattered among many villages, some small, some large. In each region the ritual was observed near the largest village, with people trekking for days to their nearest large village. One of the better known of these central villages was Ambober, which we visited in the mid-'80s. Hospitality was a central aspect of the holiday, with all the neighboring villagers flocking to the central village and being hosted there for several days. The religious leaders, the *kessim*, would select an appropriate mountain, ensure that it contained no graves or bodies, and prepare an area for the ritual at its summit. Immediately before Sigd, everyone would prepare their holiday clothing, and the residents of the hosting village would slaughter enough cows and sheep for a huge break-the-fast feast for all those in attendance.

The day of Sigd began with a fast — in fact, the full name of the holiday is Sigd Mehella, the second word being from the Ge'ez root "to supplicate," and indeed much of the morning was occupied with prayer. The entire assemblage would immerse in a river, and would then follow the *kessim* into the shul where there would be prayers. Then the *kessim* would take the Orit and, together with other elders, lead the assembled up the mountain (the men and women would ascend separately). Many of the men would carry rocks on their head as a symbol of their submission to G-d, and some people describe carrying stones on their shoulders, which were then placed in a circle around the *kessim* at the top of the hill. This first half of the day was devoted to prayers, repentance, and supplication.

Once the entire community reached the summit, there would be a renewal of the covenant. This is exemplified by the public reading of Nechemiah 8-9 in conjunction with various legal sections from the Torah. The blessings and curses from Shemos 23, Vayikra 26, and Devarim 27 were also read. The Biblical readings form the middle part of a long and complex liturgical service, which has repeated requests for mercy and forgiveness. The *kessim* would translate some of the Ge'ez to the local Amharic or Tigrinya. At the conclusion of this part of the service, horns would be blown and they would proclaim in unison, "Just as we have merited to celebrate the holiday this year, may we be privileged to celebrate it next year in Yerushalayim."

The second half of the day was one of joy and celebration, similar to the description of Yom Kippur afternoon in the time of the Temple. The Beta Israel would descend the mountain in song and dance, singing the verses, "Therefore the redeemed of the L-rd shall return, and come with singing to Zion" (Yeshayahu 51:11), and, "Lift up your eyes round about, and see: They all gather themselves together, they come to You" (Yeshayahu 60:4), both of which relate to the return from exile. The Orit was returned to the shul and the feasting commenced, lasting well into the night.

Keeping It Personal

While the major Jewish holidays are the same in the entire Jewish world, there are some dates that are significant to specific communities, if there was a particular salvation from a plague or an evil ruler or decree. For example, “Purim of Sarajevo” was the day in 1819 in which 13 Jews were saved from execution at the hands of the evil pasha and is celebrated until today, the Jews of Frankfurt celebrate the 20th of Adar as “Purim Vincent,” and Purim of Ancona (Italy, 1740) was observed on the second day of Succos. There are also two celebrations nearly unknown to Ashkenazic Jews outside of Israel, but practiced by millions of Sephardi Jews. These are the North African post-Pesach Mimouna and the Kurdish Seaharane (which was moved to Chol Hamoed Succos when the Kurdish Jews came to Eretz Yisrael). The Sigd, in line with these two other holidays, was officially added to the list of state holidays designated by the Knesset.

When Ethiopian Jews began arriving in significant numbers in Israel, there was a desire to continue observing the holiday in their new home. The first official attempt to hold Sigd in Jerusalem was in 1980, but it had few attendees and was more of a demonstration than a religious event. Two years later, in 1982, the small Ethiopian community involved the *kessim*, and the religious event was held on Har Tzion. In 1983 it was again held on Har Tzion, but this time the *kessim* noticed the many Christian institutions in the vicinity, and when they saw a large cross on one of the churches they initially refused to recite any of their prayers. Instead, they proceeded down to the Kosel for the rest of the ceremony.

In planning for the future, the leaders were looking for a high place to remind them of ascending the mountain in Ethiopia, and ideally with a view of the Har Habayis. Thus, in 1984, they chose to do it in the woods near the UN headquarters in Armon Hanetziv (after assurances that the large red cross of the UN first aid station would be covered during the event) where the festival has been held since.

There was a young Ethiopian policewoman, Yaffa, who works near the Kosel and on the Sunday before Sigd when we asked her where she would be, she said, “*Im yirtzeh Hashem*, right where I am,” and she elaborated: “All the other people will be at the Tayelet starting toward the Har Habayit. I will be standing, right here, near the center of the world.”



Then and now. We knew exactly what the Sigd celebrators were talking about. On our trip to the Tigray region, we too climbed to the top of a mountain and looked down on the Jewish villages below





This Side of the Mountain

Past the grassy space on the promenade, large screens and loudspeakers were erected so that the thousands of attendees could see and hear the recitation of the Biblical verses and the prayers by the *kessim* in their colorful, traditional robes holding multicolored umbrellas. The older members of the community, in particular the women, were familiar with the prayers and were reciting along. The younger generation congregated toward the back, some of them bending their ears to acquaint themselves with their community's heritage and others more interested in connecting up with old friends, who had arrived from all over the country.

Ashagre Lakawo, 24, from Petach Tikvah, learned in the Hameiri *hesder* yeshivah, through which he did his army

service in a paratrooper combat unit. He is now back in yeshivah and also studying for an education degree, with an eye on teaching Torah to young Ethiopian Jews and keeping them connected. For Ashagre, attending the Sigd is his link to history, as in Ethiopia he was too young to climb the mountain and participate in the prayers — but he remembers the rest of the family returning and then participating in the festive meal. And he wants to make sure the young people of his generation don't lose their connection to this special day. While the 29th of Marcheshvan is not a date of significance on most Jewish calendars, the Sigd themes of teshuvah, covenant, longing for Tzion, and praying for the ultimate Geulah are in fact ideas that we all share. ●