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# Past in th

## An inside look at *Sigd*—the holiday of Ethiopian Jewry—

PHOTOS: IRVIN

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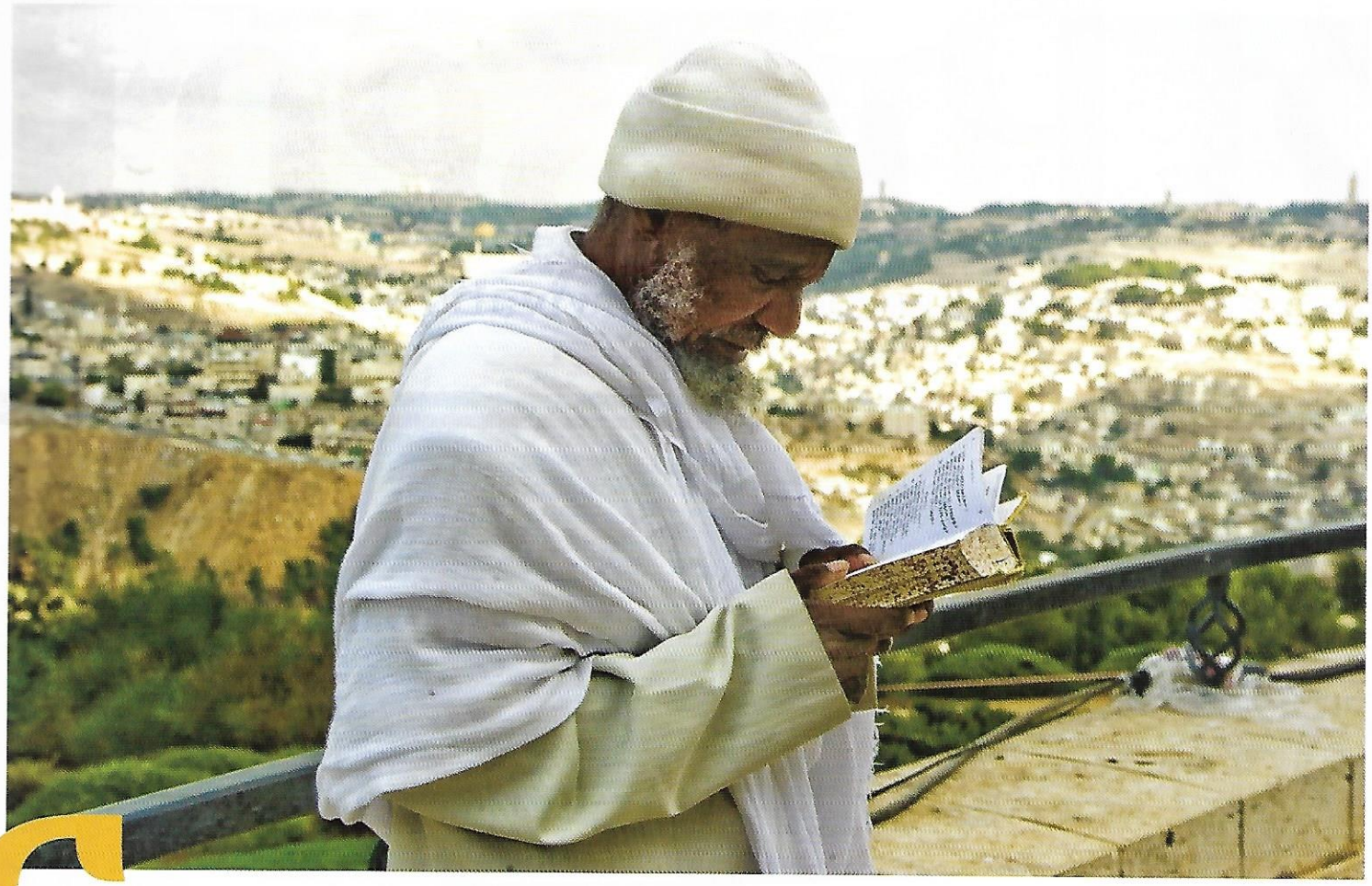
nd the struggle to secure its survival *By Shai Afsai*



For centuries, the Jews of Ethiopia, the Beta Israel, lived in almost complete isolation from other Jewish communities around the globe. In his *Travels in Abyssinia*, Joseph Halevy recounts that when he journeyed to Ethiopia in 1868 in an effort to meet with some of its members, he had difficulty convincing them that although he was white, he was a Jew. Halevy explained to the Beta Israel that there were many other Jews, and as far as their skin-color, "they could not be distinguished from the other inhabitants of their respective countries." It was only after Halevy mentioned Jerusalem that most of the Beta Israel in front of him concluded that, however astonishing, he must indeed be one of them.

During their prolonged isolation, the Beta Israel developed and preserved religious traditions not found in the rest of the Jewish world. One such tradition is the annual Sigd holiday, which normally occurs on the 29th of Cheshvan, 50 days after Yom Kippur, and during which thousands of Ethiopian Jews from across Israel ascend to Jerusalem, primarily to the Armon Hanatziv Promenade overlooking the Old City. Since 2008, the Sigd has also been an official Israeli state holiday, though it continues to be celebrated mainly by Ethiopian Jews.

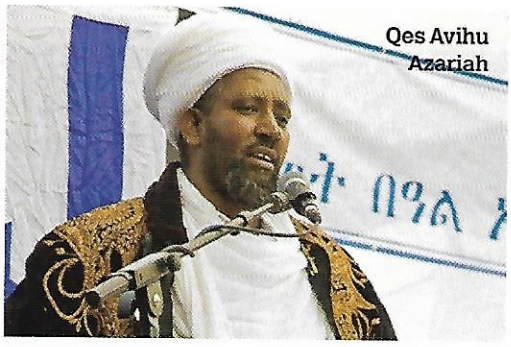
## SIGD'S BIBLICAL ORIGINS

On the morning preceding Sigd, I visited the home of Qes Emaha Negat, one of the older *qessotch* (priests) in Israel, to learn about the origins and customs of the day. The *qessotch* are the traditional spiritual leaders of Ethiopian Jewry, who led prayers, slaughtered animals, married and divorced couples, and provided religious guidance and instruction for the Beta Israel. Though called priests, they do not claim descent from Aharon Hakohen (the Priest), but rather perform functions commonly associated with rabbis in the rest of the Jewish world, as well as certain duties related to the Biblical priesthood. Recently, a young Israeli-born *qes*, the first ever in the annals of the community, was ordained in Israel, an indication that the *qessotch* institution could persist alongside the mainstream rabbinate.

Born in the Gondar district of Ethiopia, 78-year-old Qes Emaha Negat moved to Israel in 1990 and now lives in Netanya. A large photograph of the synagogue constructed in Gondar by his father, a *qes* and a scribe, hangs in the living room. Dressed entirely in white, and speaking in Hebrew and Amharic, Qes Emaha explained the Biblical events in which Sigd is rooted.

A day of Torah learning, prayer, repentance and prostration (*sigd* means prostration in Ge'ez, akin to the Aramaic *seged*), the holiday commemorates and is modeled after the events described in chapters eight, nine and ten in the Book of Nehemiah. Following their return to the Land of Israel from the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE, the Jews gathered in Jerusalem on Rosh Hashanah and requested that Ezra the Scribe read to them from the Torah:

"So on the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the Scribe brought the Torah before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand…Ezra


Qes Avihu Azariah

praised Hashem, the great G-d, and all the people lifted their hands and responded, 'Amen! Amen!' Then they bowed down and worshiped Hashem with their faces to the ground...The Levites instructed the people in the Torah while the people were standing there. They read from the book of the Torah of Hashem, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read. Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Torah, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, 'This day is holy to Hashem your G-d. Do not mourn or weep.' For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Torah. Nehemiah said, 'Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our L-rd. Do not grieve, for the joy of Hashem is your strength.'"

In addition to the gathering on Rosh Hashanah described in chapter eight of Nehemiah, the ninth portrays another assembly that took place after the celebration of Sukkos and Shemini Atzeres, during which the community recommitted itself to the covenant between G-d and the Jewish people:

"On the 24th day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads. Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the sins of their ancestors. They stood where they were and read from the book of the Torah of Hashem their G-d for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshiping Hashem their G-d."

These two assemblies, on Rosh Hashanah and on the 24th of Tishrei, are the blueprint for Sigd. As on that particular Rosh Hashanah, Sigd begins with repentance, but concludes with a festive meal. Likewise, reading, translating and expounding upon portions of the Torah, as well as fasting, confessing sins, lifting hands in prayer and prostration, are all features of the day. Among its central motifs are separation from the gentiles, longing to return from the exile to Jerusalem and reacceptance of the Torah.

## SIGD'S HISTORICAL ORIGINS

How did the Jews of Ethiopia come to celebrate this Nehemiah-based holiday, which is not found in any other Jewish community? There are a number of traditions regarding this question. One opinion holds that at the outset all Jews continued to observe an annual holiday on the 24th of Tishrei. Over time, however, the Jews outside of Ethiopia lost the practice. This is the position taken, for example, in Rabbi Sharon Shalom's recently-published *From Sinai to Ethiopia: The Halachic and Ideological World of Ethiopian Jewry*. "In earlier times," writes Rabbi Shalom, "the Sigd holiday was known in the entire nation of Israel, but historical circumstances caused this holiday to be forgotten, though in Ethiopia this tradition was preserved."

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According to that perspective, the original holiday, maintained since the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, was eventually moved from the 24th of Tishrei. "Our forefathers who went down to Ethiopia," said Qes Emaha, "decided to hold this holiday at the end of Cheshvan, 50 days after Yom Kippur." In this way, Sigd functions as a sort of parallel to Shavuos. Moreover, in its current place in the Jewish calendar, writes Rabbi Shalom, "The Sigd holiday bridges between the individual soul-searching, whose time is Yom Kippur, to the source of the central tragedy of the nation of Israel—the exile, which came about because of a lack of proper interpersonal relationships."

However, a different tradition holds that the holiday was specifically developed within Ethiopia in response to the unique exilic circumstances in which the Jews there found themselves. As noted by Shoshana Ben-Dor, the Israeli director of the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, who has written extensively about the Beta Israel's history, religious traditions and the Sigd, "Until the middle of the last century, members of the Beta

Israel community had considered themselves to be the last Jews alive. Their recorded history speaks of long periods of warfare with the larger and stronger Christian kingdom accompanied on occasion with religious persecution and forced conversion…the communal collective memory is one of religiously based conflict and persecution."

According to Ben-Dor, "the creation of the Sigd should be viewed as a reaction to and a reflection of the way in which the community perceived itself to be threatened with loss of its identity, as a result of both wars and assimilation." In other words, Sigd is not a direct continuation of a Jewish holiday from the 6th century BCE, and as such, it is no wonder that the holiday is not found in any other community. Rather, the Beta Israel of Ethiopia instituted a unique annual holiday of communal covenantal renewal, that recalled both the revelation on Mount Sinai and the Jerusalem assemblies in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. The holiday, during which the community also publicly separated themselves from the surrounding Ethiopian Christians, satisfied a deep religious and nationalist need. Though perhaps not dating back to Biblical times, there are records of Sigd being celebrated in Ethiopia since at least the 15th century.

## BITTERSWEET CELEBRATION

Joined by his wife, Zena Malasa, as well as by his granddaughter, Facika Savhat, the *qes* paused in his explanation of the holiday's origins in order to allow us to snack on spongy *injira* bread and spicy *awaze*, accompanied by black coffee. Qes Emaha noted that Sigd has not been immune to the challenges that have confronted the community since moving from Ethiopia to Israel. "The holiday here is not celebrated at all the way it was there, because we begin to pray and translate the scriptures for the people, and then the politicians arrive and interrupt."

He also worries that Sigd is losing its religious significance and becoming more of a cultural event. In Israel, the month of November offers an array of activities and events connected with Ethiopian Jewry in the lead up to the holiday, but many of them lack a religious framework. "It would be better if there were more religious study in the days before the holiday, and less entertainment, performances, folklore and music," said Qes Emaha. "These past days have taken the holiday out of its context, which is introspection. Whoever goes to Jerusalem tomorrow with pure thoughts, openly, will celebrate the holiday as it should be. One must come to serve Hashem and to pray. It is not just a social gathering."

"But the prayer and the learning are done in Ge'ez, with a translation into Amharic," the *qes's* granddaughter pointed out to him. "How can young people find themselves there?"

Qes Emaha acknowledged that there was a barrier. "But those who come can take the memory of the experience with them, and they will arrive at an understanding of the holiday when they mature," he answered. "It is also possible to have learning for the young people in Hebrew when families come." He was pleased to find out that Shoshana Ben-Dor would be setting up an educational tent at the Armon Hanatziv Promenade for just that purpose, and would be teaching the Sigd's prayers to young adults.

One of the many educational and cultural events prior to the holiday took place at Ramat Gan's Bar-Ilan University on the eve of Sigd. There, Qes Mula Zerihoon, who serves as the spiritual

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leader of the Beta Israel community in Kiryat Ekron, described the origins of the holiday to the students and soldiers in the audience. In Ethiopia, he explained, Sigd was celebrated atop designated mountains, which were ascended by foot. "When we climbed the mountain, we felt Jerusalem in our heart of hearts. This deeply impacted our Judaism. Jews came from afar, two or three days on foot, on horses and on mules, in order to have the chance to hear Torah from the *qessotch*. The people learned and were strengthened."

An important element of Sigd in Ethiopia was an emblematic separation from the neighboring Christians, Qes Mula told the Bar-Ilan audience. "On this day, we said to the Christians surrounding us: 'We are Jews, resolute, believers in the Torah. You, the gentiles, cannot sway us and convert us to Christianity, and cannot draw us to your religion.'" In addition to this emblematic separation, Sigd in Israel now also has an expanded message of national inclusiveness, as Jews from other communities are welcomed to the holiday. "I am delighted to see people of so many colors, of so many shades, from so many countries. This is the Redemption," Qes Mula said.

Noting the interpersonal aspect of the holiday, he emphasized that at this time "it is important to make peace between a man and his neighbour. We believe that prayer is accepted through peace." Qes Mula stressed that the holiday must continue to be celebrated in Israel as well. "Just as this holiday guarded us in Ethiopia, we will continue to guard it in Israel, where there is no religious persecution and each person follows his religion."

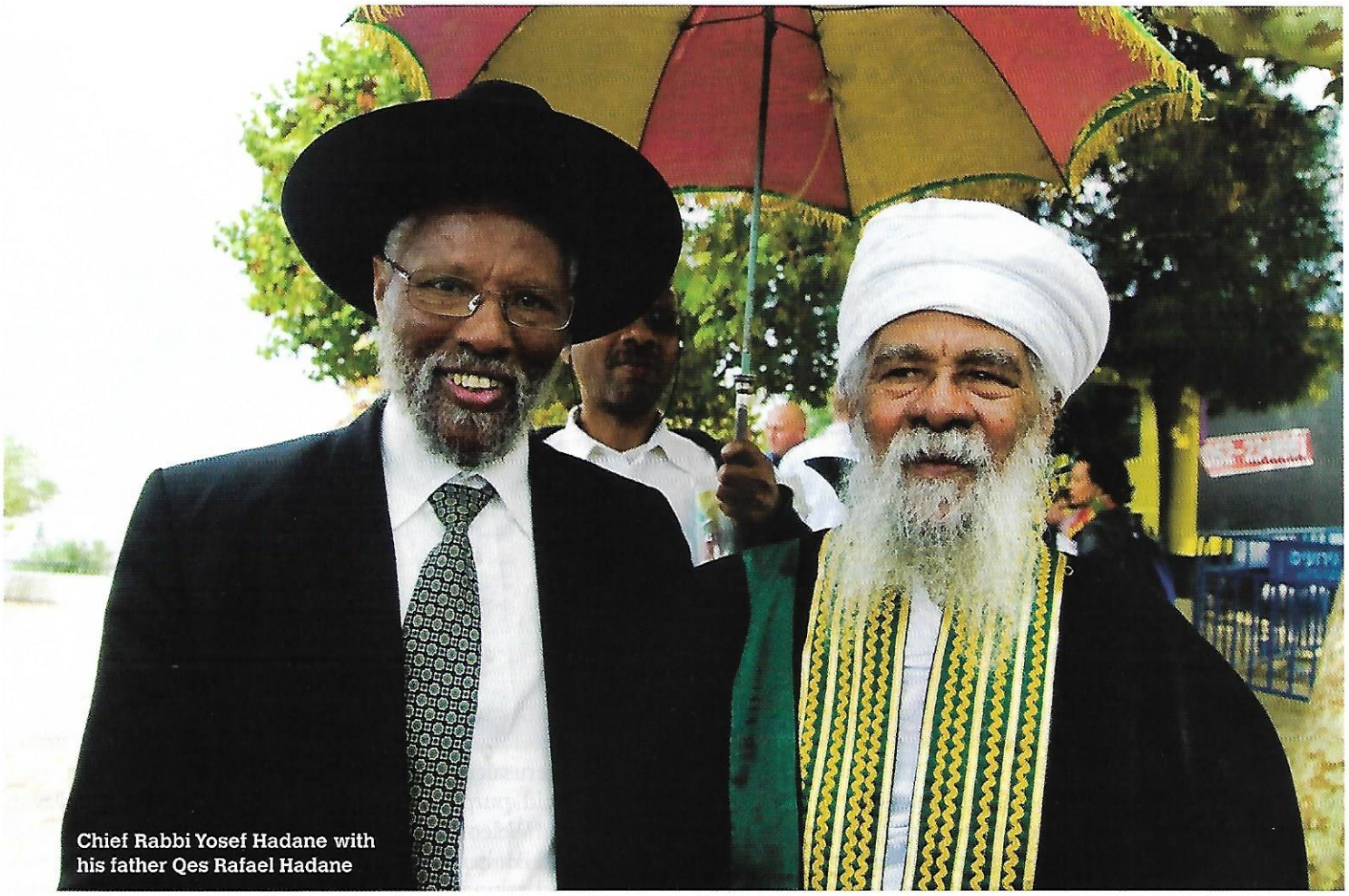
Like Qes Emaha, however, Qes Mula also pointed to some of the difficulties the community faces in celebrating the holiday in Israel. "Here the holiday is quite different. Though they do not mean to do so, the government ministers and politicians unintentionally disrupt the prayers," he said. Whereas in Ethiopia Sigd was directed entirely by the *qessotch*, and was devoted to prayer and Torah study, in Israel secular leaders also host the festival, and politicians who attend deliver speeches devoid of religious content.

## THE MAIN EVENT

The principal gathering on the day of Sigd takes place at the Armon Hanatziv Promenade, overlooking the Old City of Jerusalem. There, some 50 *qessotch* from around the country gather beneath colorful umbrellas, on a platform draped by the flags of Israel and Jerusalem. Many are dressed all in white. Others wear cloaks of gold, purple, or black adorned with large Stars of David.

Under a "Welcome to the Sigd Holiday" banner written in Hebrew and Amharic, the *qessotch* chant prayers in Ge'ez praising G-d and asking for forgiveness and blessings for the Jewish people. Biblical passages telling of the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, and the return of the Jews to Jerusalem from the Babylonian exile are read by the *qessotch* in Ge'ez and then translated into Amharic. Though studied by the *qessotch* and used in religious contexts, most Ethiopian Jews are not conversant in the ancient Ethiopian language of Ge'ez. Amharic remains the first language of many in the community who now live in Israel.

The politicians and government spokespeople who interrupt the prayers at midday in order to address the crowd are met with scant applause. It is only when the chairman of the *qessotch* council, Qes Avihu Azariah, rises to speak in Hebrew and Amharic that the worshipers applaud loudly and display renewed interest in the proceedings. Qes Avihu begins his address by stressing that Sigd belongs not only to Ethiopian Jews, but "is a holiday of the



Chief Rabbi Yosef Hadane with his father Qes Rafael Hadane

Jewish nation."

The *qessotch's* prayers resume after the politicians' speeches, taking on a more festive tone. The preceding hours of prayer and study build to a religious crescendo. Several of the priests sway, accompanied by rhythmic drumming. Women, dressed in white, raise their hands, ululate, and bow and prostrate, pressing their foreheads to the ground.

**When the qessotch descend from the platform at the conclusion of the services they are quickly enveloped by the worshipers who accompany them with ululation applause and trumpet blasts**

When the *qessotch* descend from the platform at the conclusion of the services, they are quickly enveloped by the worshipers, who accompany them with ululation, applause and trumpet blasts to a nearby tent, to break the fast communally following the repentance and renewal of the covenant.

Outside the tent, I speak with Rabbi Yosef Hadane, the Chief Rabbi of the Ethiopian community, who is pleased with the proceedings and the large turnout. "This day is a day of unity. So many people came and answered *amen* to the prayers of the *qessotch*. This opens the Heavens...The spiritual leaders, the *qessotch*, pray and embrace the community. This is what was traditionally done in Ethiopia."

Rabbi Hadane considers it vital that the holiday continue to be celebrated now that Ethiopian Jewry has at long last arrived in Israel. "Our forefathers in Ethiopia always prayed to return to Jerusalem and always prayed in the direction of Jerusalem....We are here, but the vast majority of the Jewish nation is still in the diaspora, and this day and these prayers are very important for ingathering the exiles. Therefore, I would suggest that Jews in Israel and the rest of the world adopt this holiday....I would say this is not only for the Jews of Ethiopia. It is for the entire nation.

"This is not just an event," Rabbi Hadane insisted. "This is an

entirely pure day, a day of prayer." Indeed, for the thousands of worshippers pressed together at the Armon Hanatziv Promenade, Sigd is an intensely religious experience. "I had chills," says 21-year-old Orly Sahalo. "I came and saw all the women dressed in white, lifting their hands. And saw the *qessotch* using musical instruments, just as written in the Torah."

Sahalo is especially impressed by the activities for children and young adults at the Armon Hanatziv Promenade. "They will learn, and this holiday will have a continuation. I was also moved to see the *qessotch* distributing handfuls of Jerusalem soil to the worshipers. People are able to take a piece of Jerusalem home with them, just as in Ethiopia they were able to take home soil from the mountain on which Sigd was held."

## GIVING SIGD TO ALL JEWS

Among those offering educational activities at the Armon Hanatziv Promenade are Shoshana Ben-Dor of NACOEJ and Ziva Mekonen-Degu, executive director of the Israel Association of Ethiopian Jews. Both women provide instruction about the order and meaning of the day's prayers to some 80 visitors, most of whom are young adults.

Ben-Dor underscores that, "the prayers to return to Jerusalem are only one aspect of the holiday. There are also prayers of repentance and asking for forgiveness. Thus, even in Jerusalem, the holiday needs to be continued." In the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, she explains, "the rights to Jerusalem and the Land of Israel, and the return to them are tied to the renewal of the covenant. The ideas of observing the covenant and being in Jerusalem tie together this holiday."

On the morning after the Sigd, I met with Ben-Dor at her Jerusalem office to discuss her ongoing research about the holiday. "Sigd brings together elements that exist in several Jewish holidays," she says. "It has the aspects of repentance, asking for mercy, and hoping that G-d has forgiven us that are found in the High Holidays. It has the mourning for Jerusalem found in Tisha B'av. It has the covenant and giving of the Torah found in Shavuot. The Sigd is the only day in the entire calendar that brings these all together—and also includes an annual renewal of the covenant."

For a number of years, Ben-Dor has been warning that there is a danger the holiday may lose its religious focus in Israel, and that this problem is exacerbated by insufficient instruction about the significance of its prayers and by the lack of a holiday prayer book for worshipers to use. In collaboration with the *qessotch* and Mekonen-Degu, she has been preparing a Sigd *siddur*, the first of its kind, which is slated to be published by next year's festival. The prayers will be written in four columns—in Ge'ez, in Ge'ez transliterated into Hebrew, in Amharic and in Hebrew. They hope this will make the holiday accessible to more people and help preserve its religious core. "When the siddur comes out, more people will realize how beautiful and powerful the prayers are," says Ben-Dor.

In *From Sinai to Ethiopia*, Rabbi Sharon Shalom addresses the halachic standing of the Sigd as a holiday that is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible or Talmud. Whether the holiday emerged in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, or developed later in Ethiopia, Rabbi Shalom counsels that Ethiopian Jews persist in celebrating the Sigd in Israel. "The Ethiopian Jews will continue to mark the Sigd, which is an ancient holiday, and was once perhaps kept by all of Israel. Love and unity, [and] the establishment of the covenant with the G-d of Israel and Jerusalem, are always relevant." ●

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