

קהילות

THIS ISSUE:
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P.9

HOW CAN SYNAGOGUES EVOLVE ?

*At its 100th anniversary
United Synagogue gathers
the Conservative world
to imagine the next century.*

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BIG TENT OR NARROWER TENT? // THE GIFT OF SIGD // BEYOND THE
HEBREW SCHOOL LAMENT // RELATIONAL JUDAISM // AND MORE

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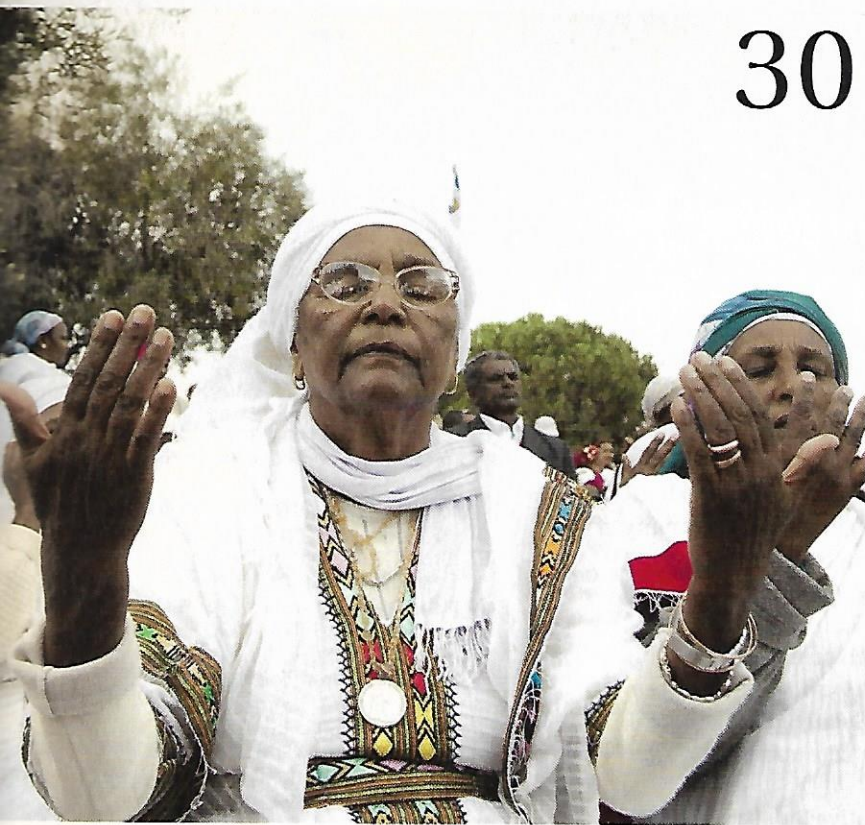
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Yesterday, today and
tomorrow.

ILLUSTRATION BY
DASHA ZIBOROVA

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THE GIFT OF SIGD

UNTIL THE MIDDLE OF THE 19TH CENTURY, the Jews of Ethiopia – the Beta Israel (House of Israel), as they call themselves – lived in almost complete isolation from other Jewish communities. One of the distinct religious traditions they cultivated during that isolation is the Sigd, a holiday that falls 50 days after Yom Kippur. Though an official Israeli holiday since 2008, it is celebrated primarily only by the country's roughly 120,000 Ethiopian Jews.

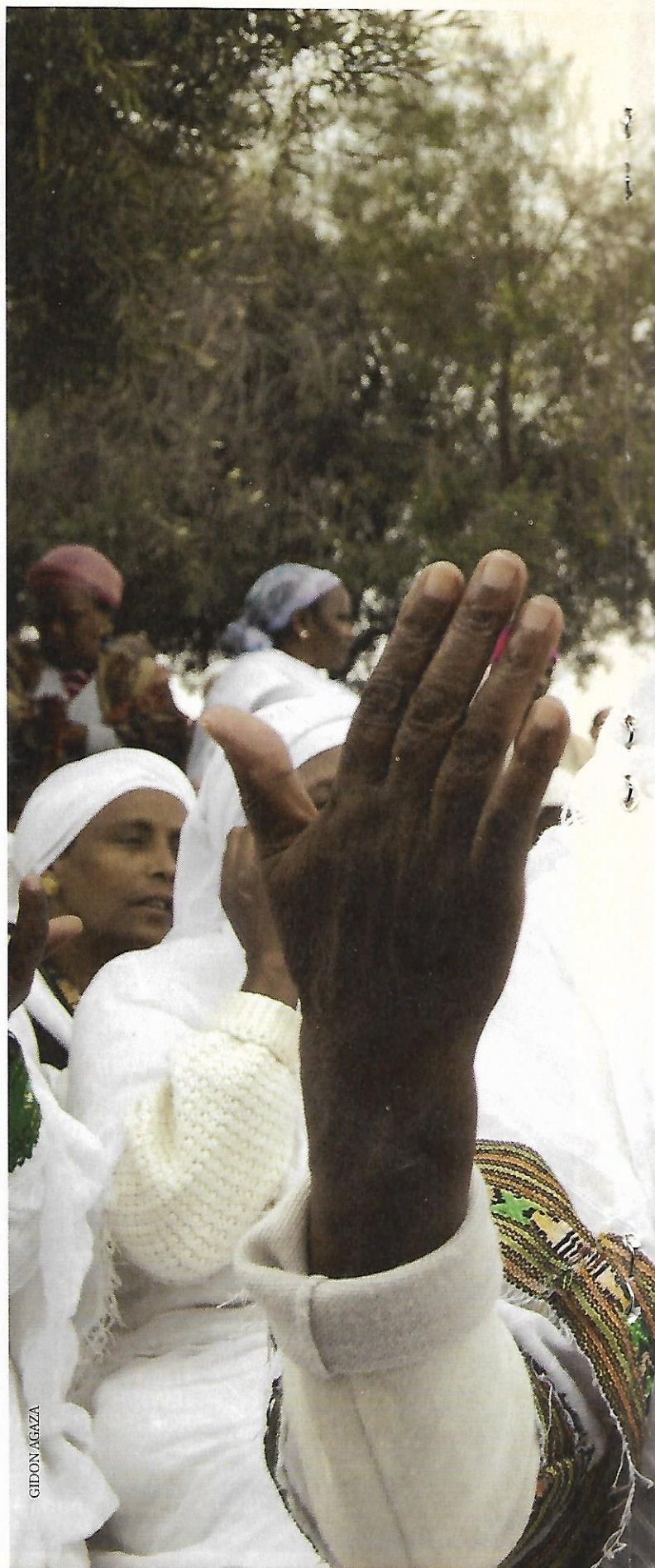
In November 2012, together with Ethiopian-Israeli filmmaker Tezeta Germay, I met with several *qessotch* – traditional spiritual leaders – and community members who were delighted to share their traditions about the Sigd.

Germay and I visited Qes Emaha Negat, one of the oldest *qessotch* in Israel. Born in the Gondar district of Ethiopia, 78-year-old Qes Emaha came to Israel in 1991, and now lives in Netanya. A photograph of the synagogue built in Gondar by his father, a *qes* and scribe, hangs in the living room. Clothed entirely in white, his head wrapped in a white turban, and speaking Hebrew and Amharic, Qes Emaha recounted the Sigd's biblical roots.

Sigd means “prostration” or “bowing down” in Ge’ez, the ancient Ethiopian liturgical language. The holiday is patterned after the events described in the Book of Nehemiah, when in the 6th century B.C.E, following the Babylonian exile, the Jews gathered in Jerusalem and asked that Ezra the Scribe read to them from the Torah:

So on the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the priest brought the Torah before the people . . . Ezra praised the Lord, the great God, and all the people lifted their hands and responded, “Amen! Amen!” Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord 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 the Lord, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

(Nehemiah 8:2-8)



GIDON AGAZA

The Sigd is a central holiday for the Beta Israel, who would like to see Jews worldwide celebrate its call for Jewish unity, reflection and prayer.

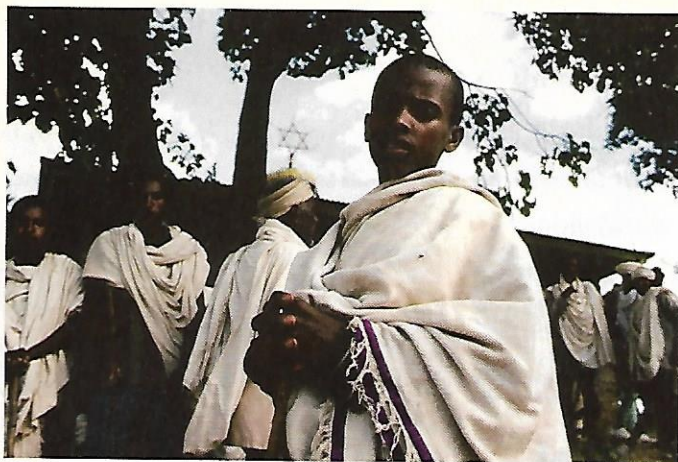
By Shai Afsai



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ILENE PERLMAN



NEHEMIAH RECOUNTS another Jerusalem assembly several weeks later that culminated in the Judean community publically recommitting itself to the covenant between God and the Jewish people:

ON THE TWENTY-FOURTH 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 the Lord their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshipping the Lord their God. (*Nehemiah 9:1-3*)

Those ancient assemblies are the blueprint for the Sigd, with its reading, translation and expounding of biblical selections, as well as lifting hands in prayer and prostration. The Sigd also involves fasting, a communal confession of sins, and a renewal of the Israelite covenant with God.

How did the Beta Israel come to celebrate a holiday not found in any other Jewish community? Rabbi Sharon Shalom, in *From Sinai to Ethiopia: The Halachic and Ideological World of Ethiopian Jewry* (2012), suggests that “in earlier times, the Sigd holiday was known in the entire nation of Israel, but the historical circumstances caused this holiday to be forgotten, though in Ethiopia this tradition was preserved.”

A different opinion holds that the Sigd was a response to circumstances in Ethiopia. According to Shoshana Ben-Dor, the Israeli director of the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, the Beta Israel’s communal collective memory is of religious persecution at the hands of Christian neighbors. “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,” Ben-Dor proposes, adding that the Jerusalem assemblies were especially inspiring to the isolated community in Ethiopia.

Qes Emaha worries that the Sigd has been losing its religious significance and is becoming merely a cultural event. Many of the programs in Israel connected to Ethiopian Jewry during November lack any religious framework. “It would be better if there were more study in the days before the holiday, and less entertainment, performances, folklore, and music,” said Qes Emaha. “Whoever goes to Jerusalem with pure thoughts will celebrate the holiday as it should be. One must come to serve God and to pray. It is not just a social gathering.”

Longing to return to Jerusalem is one of the holiday’s central themes, and in Ethiopia it was celebrated atop mountains, explained Mula Zerihon, an Ethiopian-born qes ordained in Israel. “When we climbed the mountain, we felt Jerusalem in our heart of hearts. Jews came from afar, two or three days on foot, on horses and on mules, to have the chance to hear Torah from the qessotch. The people learned and were strengthened.” The Sigd also highlighted the Beta Israel’s distinction from its neighbors and provided a response to intensive Christian missionizing. “On this day, we said to the Christians surrounding us: We are Jews, resolute believers in the Torah. You cannot sway us and convert us to Christianity, and cannot draw us to your religion.”

The theme of unity continues, with Jews from other communities being welcomed to celebrate. “I am delighted to see Jews of so many colors, of so many shades, from so many countries. This is the Redemption,” Qes Mula declared. “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.”

Since the 19th century, Ethiopian Jews have been bringing their traditions and practices more in line with rabbinic Judaism. But while they have been celebrating Chanukkah, wearing tallitot and donning tefillin, the larger Jewish world has not taken on any of their ancient traditions. The qessotch and community leaders have become less amenable to this imbalance, with its attendant implication that Ethiopian Jewry has nothing to offer the wider Jewish world.

In fact, from the perspective of the religious leaders, state recognition of the Sigd is only a start. They would like to have the celebration become an integral part of the Jewish holiday cycle. “Let more Jews join in its celebration, but without changing its traditions,” said Qes Mula.

On the morning of the Sigd celebration last fall, one of the first worshipers I encountered was Adgo Salehu. Dressed in white, and draped in a red, yellow and green sash, Salehu underscored the Sigd’s role in sustaining Ethiopian Jewry during its long exile. He quickly moved to advocating that all Jews embrace it. “By virtue of keeping the Sigd and the *Orit* [Torah] in Ethiopia, and of our prayers, we were finally able to reach Jerusalem,” Salehu said. “The message of the holiday is that we are all brothers and that all Jews are accountable for one another. This day of prayer must not only be for the Jews from Ethiopia, but for the whole nation.”

On the day of the Sigd, thousands of Ethiopian Jews ascend to Jerusalem, primarily to the Armon Hanatziv Promenade

Ben-Dor explains that although the Sigd easily aligns with Zionist ideology, “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.” She is confident that all Jews would benefit from observing the Sigd. “It has the aspects of repentance, asking for mercy, and hoping that God has forgiven us that are found in the High Holidays. It has the mourning for Jerusalem found in Tishah B’Av. It has the returning to Zion found in Yom Ha’Atzmaut. It has the covenant and giving of the Torah found in Shavuot. It also includes an annual renewal of the covenant.”

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Yosef Hadane, chief rabbi of the Beta Israel community, stressed the significance of continuing to celebrate the Sigd in Israel as well as in other countries. "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," he said. "This day and these prayers are very important for ingathering the exiles and for the coming of the messiah. I would suggest that Jews around the world adopt this. I would say this is for the entire Jewish nation." **CJ**

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