

Jerusalem Day :

The Memorial Day for Ethiopian Jews Who Perished on their Way to Israel

28 Iyar (Sunday, May 17, 2015)

Several years ago, Israel established an official memorial day for some 4,000 Ethiopian Jews who died on their way to Israel while trekking across the deserts of Sudan. It might be more appropriate to say that the victims died on their way to Jerusalem, which had been the focus of their dreams for centuries. The testimonies of the Ethiopian Olim who survived the journey, lost family and friends, and witnessed terrible suffering and atrocities are rarely heard outside the

Ethiopian community. The decision to declare an official day of commemoration is positive in itself, but it is merely the beginning of a long process that has not yet received sufficient attention: a process by which Israeli society as a whole will become familiar with the culture of the Ethiopian Jews and recognize the enormous suffering they underwent in order to realize their Jewish and Zionist vision.



Longing for Zion

Welcome Back, Fine Bird

The Stork

Lyrics: Haim Idissis, melody: Shlomo Gronich

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NauLC43hAc0>

A stork flew to the Land of Israel
Spreading its wings above the Nile
To the far-off land
Beyond the mountains where Beita Israel
Sit and wait

White-necked stork
What did you see?
Sing me a story

The stork is silent and does not open her beak
Resting on her leg, soon she
will stretch out a broad wing
On her journey to the cold, she will make a stop
In Zion, the land of light Red-beaked stork
Will Jerusalem
Still remember us?

White-winged stork
Inquire how fares the city
How fares Jerusalem

For Ethiopian Jews, **the stork** symbolized their longings for Jerusalem and the Land of Israel. This is because as storks migrate, they pass through Ethiopia and on to Israel. Their journey to Israel is the journey the Ethiopian Jews dreamed of for centuries before they managed to make Aliyah.



When they saw a stork in the

sky, they would call out: “Shimala, shimala, agradachin arusalam dahana” – “Stork, stork, inquire how fares Jerusalem our nation.”

To the Chief Musician. On an instrument of Gath. A Psalm of the sons of Korah.

How lovely is Your tabernacle, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the Lord. My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. **Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself where she may lay her young. Even Your altars, O Lord of hosts, My King and my God.** Blessed are those who dwell in Your house; they will still be praising You. Selah. Blessed is the man whose strength is in You, whose heart is set on pilgrimage. As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a spring. The rain also covers it with pools. **They go from strength to strength; each one appears before God in Zion.** O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, O God of Jacob! Selah. O God, behold our shield, and look upon the face of Your anointed. For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness. For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord will give grace and glory. No good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly. **O Lord of hosts, blessed is the man who trusts in You! (Psalm 84)**



Hearing from Zion

Although **Beita Israel** – the traditional name of the Jewish community in Ethiopia – was disconnected from the Land of Israel and from the global Jewish community for many centuries, it never forgot its Jewish origins. The Ethiopian Jews refused to convert to Christianity and preserved their Jewish way of life and ancient customs. After the connection with the community was renewed in the mid-nineteenth century, several European rabbis urged the Ethiopian community to rejoin the Jewish people as a whole, and even to reach the Land of Israel. Even before the mass Aliyah, we find letters from rabbis such as Rabbi Kook encouraging Ethiopian Jews to immigrate to the Land of Israel.

In 1942, Rabbi Ben Zion Uzziel, the Sephardi Chief Rabbi, sent the following moving letter to the Beita Israel community:

To our brethren near and far, the far-flung of Israel in the lands of Ethiopia. Dear brethren! From Zion, our holy city and glory, and from the hills of splendid Jerusalem, we send faithful wishes to you for your salvation and redemption... And we call on you, your tribes, and your families in love and fellowship: Dear brethren! Lift up your eyes and see... from within the mists of darkness and the pillars of consuming and destructive fire against which the world is struggling, and which are trying our people in all its lands of dispersion, our community in the Land of Israel shines before us as the harbinger of redemption, growing and prospering most wondrously... With astonishment we see the first redeeming signs of “the children will return to their borders” [Jeremiah 31:16], and your redemption is with them... We see the first signs of the prophetic destiny: “And in that day a great trumpet will sound. Those who were perishing in Assyria and those who were exiled in Egypt will come” (Isaiah 27:13) And with this faith, we send to you our friend and your friend Dr. Faitlovitch, to revive your schools and college for your sons and daughters, to teach them Torah and the commandments, and thereby to prepare them for their return and your return... We anticipate speedy and full redemption and the rebuilding of Zion and Ariel.

Rabbi Ben Zion Uzziel, *Michmanei Uzziel*, 5709.

From as early as the mid-nineteenth century, individual Jews from Ethiopia visited the Land of Israel and told stories of the condition of the Jews there. It was around the same time that the first Jewish visitors reached Ethiopia:



“When I happened to mention the word Jerusalem, all doubts as to my words vanished from the hearts of my Ethiopian fellow Jews. Like a flash of lightning in the night, the name Jerusalem illuminated the eyes and hearts of these brethren of ours. I had a difficult time answering all their questions – they did not tire of asking me, and of weeping for the memory of our ancient glory. These were precious moments for me and I shall not forget them as long as I live. Mortal language is inadequate to describe the emotions that seized me at that time, and this wonderful sight of my brethren and coreligionists illuminated with passion as they remembered the history of our people! I

told them that before leaving for Ethiopia I had been to Jerusalem. I explained that the city that was once the epitome of beauty had now lost its dignity and beauty and stood in destruction and desolation. I told them that where our Temple and the dwelling place of our splendor once stood, there now stands a house of prayer for the Ishmaelites. When they heard these things, they became very sad and wept bitterly until they had no strength to cry anymore; and wept with them. These remote brethren of ours had believed that the Temple still stood in its splendor and glory, and that our people who dwell there enjoyed the greatest dignity of the nations. They had no knowledge of the present condition of our Holy Land, and were unaware that it is ruled by the Sultan of Turkey. And after my words and my conversation with them, most of them believed that I am a Jew. And yet there were still some who found this difficult to believe.”

Rabbi Sharon Shalom, *From Sinai to Ethiopia*, p. 88

The Journey to Zion

Between 1977 and 1985, the Jews of Ethiopian began to leave the country. Some 20,000 members of the community left their homes abruptly and secretly. They embarked on a difficult and traumatic journey toward the borders of Ethiopia – particularly the border with Sudan. They trekked across unfamiliar parts of the country, taking countless different routes across difficult terrain. They crossed mountain ranges and deserts and coped with raging rivers and dense forests. They were attacked by wayside robbers and suffered hunger, thirst, disease, and death.

In most cases, their journey on foot took three to five weeks, but others were forced to trek for six months, a year, and even several years. Some of those attempting to leave were arrested, only to begin the journey again.



The Ethiopian Olim see their journey through the prism of their Jewish identity. The dream of reaching Zion – “Yerusalem” – is an ancient one in the Ethiopian Jewish community, passed from father to son and mother to daughter. They always believed that one day the time would come to go up to Jerusalem.

As the Ethiopian Jews prepared for their journey, and as they walked through Ethiopian and into Sudan, their Jewish identity was further crystallized and reinforced. They believed that God was guiding their journey. He had told them to embark on the trek; He was leading and guiding them along a tortuous path; He provided unexpected help in the face of enemies and captors, or by miraculously giving them ideas of what to do next. He gave them the strength to keep on walking and to help others. Alongside faith in God, the Ethiopian Jews attempted to keep the Jewish commandments and customs along the way, including the laws concerning Sabbath, Passover, Kashrut, and ritual purity. Many of those who made the journey tell of times when they were being chased by bandits or government soldiers while they were still in Ethiopia. Although they were close to the Sudanese border and could have escaped, they stopped walking before the beginning of the Sabbath. They were arrested and had to recommence their journey from tens or hundreds of kilometers inside Ethiopia.

“People started to tell us that many people were walking to Jerusalem. This was a distant dream for us. Someone dreams all day, and when the dream comes true he doesn’t believe it, and then he starts to dream again. The girl took her mother’s hand and thought to herself: ‘We’re going to Jerusalem. Everyone is going there, and now we are too. We are going to Jerusalem, which is all golden, even the earth and the stones, and there is always a rainbow and a golden halo above its sky. It doesn’t matter that we’re leaving our homes – we’re going to a better place, in fact – to the best place in the world.’”

Testimony of Zehava Gadmo

“‘Get up, Waraka, we need to go.’ I heard my father’s voice as if in a dream. ‘Get up, Waraka,’ he told me again. Reluctantly I woke up and looked at my father, who was dressed. ‘What time is it?’ I asked. ‘Four o’clock in the morning,’ he replied. ‘So why did you wake me up?’ I asked in amazement. ‘Because we’re leaving, Waraka. We’re going to Jerusalem.’ His eyes were shining – I could see that even in the dark. ‘We’re going to Jerusalem, we’re going to Jerusalem’ I whispered to myself, as if unable to believe it. A wave of happiness flooded over me. I knew that soon our future would be in Holy Jerusalem.”

Testimony of Waraka Gadsu



Song of the Voyage

Lyrics: Haim Idissis, melody: Shlomo Gronich, English translation: Jacob Sanders

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rj2gLr0PMII>

The moon watching over above
On my back, the meager bag of food
The desert beneath me, no end in front
And my mama promises my little brothers...

A bit more, a little more
To lift you your legs
A final effort
Before Jerusalem

The strong moonlight scene
Our bag of food got lost
The never-ending desert, the howls of jackals
And my mum calms my little brothers...

Another moment, a little more,
Soon we will be redeemed
We won't stop going, to the land of Israel

And in the night, bandits attacked
With knives and a sharp sword
In the desert, the blood of my mum, the moon my
witness and I promise my little brothers

Just a moment, a little more
The dream will be fulfilled
Soon we will arrive, to the land of Israel

In the moon, my mama's image
Looking at me. Mum, don't disappear from me!
If only she was by my side, she would be able to
convince them, that I'm Jewish

A moment more, a little more
The dream will be fulfilled
Soon we will arrive, to the land of Israel

A moment more, a little more
Lift your legs
A final effort
Before Jerusalem.

Arriving in Zion

Between 1977 and 1991 over 30,000 Ethiopian Jews came to Israel in three main waves. The first wave included the Ethiopian Jews who came to Israel after the long trek through Sudan. This was followed by Operation Moses in 1984 and Operation Solomon in 1991. The arrival of the Ethiopian Olim in Israel has been marred by a series of crises relating to the contrast between the dream and the reality, the difficulties of absorption, identity crises, cultural gaps, and so forth. In his book *From Sinai to Ethiopia*, Rabbi Shalom Sharon (who himself made this journey) offers a powerful description of this encounter:

“Here is another story that reflects a different aspect of the crisis. A Jewish Agency counselor told it to me during the community's early days in Israel. Immediately after Operation Moses, they took all the *kesim* (the spiritual leaders of the community) on a visit to Jerusalem – the city they had dreamed of over the years (although they used the term ‘Jerusalem’ to refer to the entire Land of Israel). One of the *kesim* raised his hand and asked: ‘Where is Jerusalem?’ Yaacov from the Jewish Agency replied: ‘We’ve been in Jerusalem all day, and now we are at the Western Wall.’ The *kes* asked: ‘Where is the Temple?’ Yaacov pointed to the Temple Mount and explained: ‘That is where the Temple was.’ Suddenly they all fell to the ground in the Western Wall plaza, their faces hidden, and began to cry like children.”

Rabbi Sharon Shalom, *From Sinai to Ethiopia*, p. 66

Memories of Africa

Lyrics: Shlomo Mashiah, melody: Shlomo Gronich

We stepped into a great big bird with iron wings
Mama softly cried, but papa was silent most of the time
Then he turned to me and said: "Son, take a look around
Although the sky is full of clouds, in the end there is the Land of Israel."

The Bible says the land is very good
You can drink milk from the ground there
Our Father Abraham made his covenant there
And our places lies there; that is what God has decided.

We stepped into a great big bird with iron wings
Mama softly cried, but papa was silent most of the time
He knew that everything was about to change
Farewell, Africa. Everything is obliterated in a single day.

Today he hunts here for our Father Jacob
Sometimes he speaks little of the country where we once lived

Reminding us that it wasn't good for us there. I know that –
But I can tell from his eyes that he misses it a little.

We stepped into a great big bird with iron wings
Mama softly cried, but papa was silent most of the time
The door closed on everything that had been.
Memories of Africa – of hunger and dust.

Papa had no idea then what to expect
He did not know that cars speed across the holy land
Things are a bit different here, in our ancestors' land
And our people have changed since the Ten Commandments.

We stepped into a great big bird with iron wings
Mama softly cried, but papa was silent most of the time
Then he turned to me and said: "Son, take a look around
Although the sky is full of clouds, in the end there is the Land of Israel."

The Ethiopian community in Israel

The Ethiopian community continues to struggle for identity within Israeli society, painfully aware of its differences and seeking ways to belong. The following is an excerpt from a letter written by Avraham Adaga to the thousands of Ethiopian Jews who died on the way to the Land of Israel:

“In the land where you dreamed of living peacefully, we still debate – and perhaps people will continue to debate into eternity – whether there can be such a thing as a black Jew of Ethiopian origin. As if the Bible told us that the Jewish ancestors were pearly white. Your death spared you the emotional torment of debates that insult our very bones regarding your Jewish identity. I tell people that you thought you were the only Jews on earth and they laugh loudly and scornfully. Your Jewish heritage, which you guarded with your lives for two thousand years, is not taught in the schools. Your efforts to come here over at least 150 years are not mentioned in the history books. After all, you were only discovered 100 years ago, and it was only 25 years ago that they saved your relatives on eagle’s wings. In the land you dreamed of living in, people live at a dizzying pace and have a very short memory. People don’t even remember last summer’s war, and certainly have no time for memories of the past. I am afraid that your memory will be the preserve of the few, and will fade away as the generation that experienced the trek passes”.

Avraham Adaga, a member of the Ethiopian community and author of the book *The Journey to the Dream*



Alongside accusations we can also find desperate calls for action. The following dirge is written in the style usually recited by Ethiopian Jews on Tisha B’Av. Its author is unknown. The poem urges both individuals and society to engage in soul-searching and to be brave enough to acknowledge social injustice and the suffering of others. The author warns that these faults have in the past led to exile and division; accordingly, we must remember the past and avoid repeating our mistakes. The poem ends with a supplication to God for forgiveness and pardon :



Let us remember and write down what happened to us

Let us remember the Temple, which we lost through our errors

We have sinned before you, Lord. We have been greedy, lied, and rebelled against Your laws.

We have harmed the elderly and lonely in society, those who do not have enough.

We have told ourselves that “the Lord will not see.”

We have closed our ears to the cries of those in pain; shut our eyes to the suffering of the poor

They have passed us by in silence; we have ignored them and walked on

And this is why the Lord removed us from our land. And the Lord was angry.

And the Lord sees.

Let us remember and write down what happened to us

And do not say that it will not happen again

For this is how we lost the Temple

Let us remember and write down the old disaster, and prevent the disaster yet to come

Let us remember

See what is happening in society

Sighs of pain come from our fellow immigrants

But we do not hear them. They exist but are unseen

Black yet transparent

Only the rich, powerful, and media exist and are heard.

This is a different world, the world of the strong

And if you have no connections with the rich – you have nothing to do in your land

Is it not important that you are a good person; are good connections all that matter?!

Let us learn from the past, for it seems we are nearing that situation again, God forbid

If we do not say that it will not happen again, but instead remember

Do good and prevent our own destruction

O Lord, we have rebelled against your laws

Forgive us, Father in heaven

We shall approach You with supplications and prayers

Repent of Your anger and let our prayers reach Your gates

Please, forgive us

And give us a way to return to your lap

You are merciful and graceful, forgiving all Your children

Popular dirge

The Memorial Day for Ethiopian Jews Who Perished on their Way to Israel

In 2003, Israel dedicated a special memorial for some 4,000 Ethiopian Jews who died on their way to the Land of Israel. Jerusalem Day was also declared the Memorial Day for Ethiopian Jews Who Perished on Their Way to Israel.



A letter to those who died in Sudan on their way to Israel / Avraham Adaga

"I am writing this letter to people who will never read it. This is a desperate attempt to revive their memory, which has been lost in a sea of sad memories in this disaster-struck Land. Pessimists will suggest that I am awakening the dead. Cynics will screech that I am exaggerating. But I am afraid that you will be forgotten without anyone even noticing. You are not one hundred or two hundred, but 4,000 men and women, old people and children, who believed that they belong here. You struggled to realize your dream and set out on an arduous trek on foot, through dense jungles, raging rivers, and frightful deserts with terrifying and heartless murderers and rapists. Yet you have remained there, in that endless vastness, buried in the ground in an unmarked grave, many of you without anyone even placing some soil on your bodies. Despite the dangers, you kept on walking in your masses on a trek the like of which, I believe, has not been seen since the Exodus from Egypt. You walked night and day to reach the cursed land of Sudan. Sudan opened its mouth and threatened to consume us all without leaving any trace. More than a few of you lived alongside me in the refugee camps that became death traps each morning as the sun rose. Strapping men, merciful mothers, and children who had not yet tasted life wilted there like flowers in the sun. Like everyone else there, I was forced to watch you starving before my eyes, and I accompanied you to those hiding places called graves. I will not forget the nights when we discussed how to get rid of your bodies without anyone seeing, far from the eyes of hostile Gentiles. I will not forget the days when my face was scarred by dry tears, nor the moments of despair and helplessness. I will not forget how my only concern was for those who would be left alive after me and would have to endanger themselves by seeking a place to bury my body. In the cursed land of Sudan we lost our last human dignity. Some of your families were obliterated as if they had never been created. Children were left orphans, parents lost their children, men lost their wives, and women were left without their husbands. You did all this in order to reach your promised land, yet it was in vain."

Yizkor

May God remember the thousands of his sons and daughters, our brothers and sisters, Jews from the community of Beita Israel, who perished during the journey from Ethiopia to the Land of Israel and died in hunger and thirst, in the desert heat and in the frozen nights, and those who were killed and murdered during their journey by the wicked ones who sought to do evil and to take their souls. “Zion will weep bitterly and Jerusalem will join its voice. My heart is with their lost ones, my stomach with their killed ones.”

May the People of Israel remember their heroism and be blessed by their seed and their heritage. May it mourn the sacred will and devotion lost during the journey to the land of Zion and Jerusalem.

May the martyrs of the community of Beita Israel be sealed in Israel’s heart from each generation to the next. And let us say:

Amen.

The Eyes of Beita Israel / Shimon Peres

They are large and bright.

Like a bush that has not been consumed over thousands of generations.

Their charm storms out in rare beauty

And a bright pupil longs for Zion

The white of the eye – like a piece of Mt. Hermon

The eyelid falls modestly and apologetically

Together, densely, in an embracing sadness

Distance hides in the retreating hills

Beit Israel was not disconnected

And Hear o Israel

Was not silenced

The legacy breathes. Peace to the letter

The way is fiercely hot and thorny

Robbery and evil chase after you

And the people walks. Some of them reach

The landscape of a homeland that offers no calm

With the soft longings that brought you here

It was hard. And you arrived as a dream

Your beauty storming out like a rare wonder

With an ancient taste. With a young touch.

