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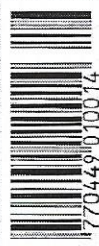
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Ethiopian Zion

Jerusalem ¶ For many thousands of Ethiopian Jewish worshippers thronging beneath the blue November sky, the Sigd holiday was an intensely religious experience. “I had chills,” 21-year-old Orly Sahalo said of the scene from the Armon Hanatziv Promenade, overlooking the Old City of Jerusalem: the qessotch — traditional religious leaders of Ethiopian Jews — were accompanying their prayers with drums and trumpets, exactly as described in the Bible. The Sigd usually falls on the 29th day of Cheshvan, 50 days after Yom Kippur. A morning and afternoon of fasting, repentance, Torah study and prostration (‘sigd’ means bowing, or prostration, in Ge’ez, the ancient language of the Beta Israel liturgy), the holiday commemorates and is modelled upon the events of chapters nine and ten of Nehemiah. These chapters describe how the Jews, returning to Zion from the Babylonian exile in the 6th century BCE, separated themselves from the non-Jews in the Land of Israel and publicly pledged themselves to the Torah and its commandments.

As a mark of Ethiopian Jewry’s integration into Israeli society, the Sigd was declared an official Israeli state holiday in 2008. However, many members of the Ethiopian Jewish community are uncomfortable with attempts to secularise the holiday and transform it into a cultural rather than religious event. “This is not just an event,” said Rabbi Yosef Hadane, the Chief Rabbi of the community. “This is an entirely pure day, a day of prayer.”

The qessotch are at the centre of the day. From

across the country, they gather beneath multi-coloured 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 and Amharic, praising God and asking for forgiveness and blessings for the Jewish people. They read Biblical passages telling of the exodus from Egypt, the giving of the ten commandments on Mount Sinai, and the return of the Jews to Jerusalem from the Babylonian exile.

The politicians and governmental spokespeople who interrupted the prayers at midday to address the crowd received desultory applause. When the Chairman of the Qessotch Council, Qes Aviyhu Azariah, rose the magic returned, filling the worshippers with awe. The hours of prayer and study built to a religious crescendo. The priests swayed, accompanied by rhythmic drumming. Women raised their hands, ululated and bowed and prostrated, pressing their foreheads to the ground. When the qessotch descended from the platform, they were surrounded by hundreds of congregants, who accompanied them with more ululation, applause, and trumpet blasts to a nearby tent. There they broke the fast with loaves of thick dabo bread and soft drinks, following the repentance and renewal of the covenant.

In Ethiopia, an important element of the Sigd was the emblematic separation from the surrounding Christians. At an event at Ramat Gan's Bar-Ilan University on the eve of the Sigd, Qes Mula Zerihon from the town of Kiryat Ekron, explained this aspect of the holiday. "On this day, we say to the Christians surrounding us that we are Jews, resolute, believers in the Torah. You, the gentiles, cannot sway us to convert, and cannot draw us to your religion." In Israel, the Sigd has acquired a message of inclusiveness, as Jews from other communities are welcomed to the holiday. "I am delighted to see people of so many colours, of so many shades, from so many countries. This is the Redemption," Qes Mula told the Bar-Ilan audience, mainly students and soldiers. "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." At the same time, Qes Mula pointed to some of the difficulties the community faces in celebrating the holiday in Israel. "Here the holiday is quite different [from in Ethiopia]. They do not mean to, but the government ministers and politicians disrupt our services."

The Sigd traditionally reunited far flung members of the community who may not have seen one another since the previous year's celebration. The holiday now performs a similar function in Jerusalem: within the tent, people kissed and embraced, catching up with friends

and relatives. Before heading home, some made their way to the Western Wall. Walking towards the tent for some dabo, I spoke with Chief Rabbi Hadane. "Our forefathers in Ethiopia always prayed to return to Jerusalem and always prayed in the direction of Jerusalem," he said. "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... I would suggest that Jews in Israel and the rest of the world adopt this holiday."

—*Shai Afsai*

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