

Video Clip: Sigd

An Ethiopian Jewish Holiday of Communal Repentance

Ethiopian Jewry has a long history, with traditions tracing Jewish arrival in Ethiopia to Biblical times. Yet it is only in the past decades that the greater Jewish community has been exposed to their customs and traditions. Possibly their most notable is the Sigd festival, celebrated fifty days after Yom Kippur. The festival is not like that of any other diaspora community but references, and is based on, events in the Bible.

Suggested Implementations

TaNakh

1. Mount Sinai
2. The 10 Lost Tribes (Tribe of Dan)

Jewish Holidays

1. Yom Kippur
2. Shavuoth
3. Added Jewish holidays from around the world

Background

There are a number of theories proposed regarding the origin of the Beta Israel, as the Ethiopian Jews are known. One legend holds that the marriage of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba produced a son named Menelik. When the Queen of Sheba returned to her country, in this case, Ethiopia, with the boy, King Solomon decided to send firstborn sons of Israel to accompany her. Many of those who came, decided to stay.

Other legends hold that the Beta Israel are the descendants of the tribe of Dan who wandered to Ethiopia in the tenth century BCE. Or that they are descendants of Jews who emigrated from Egypt from the seventh century BCE to the second century CE. Another holds that they are descended from Jews from Yemen who came there between the second century CE and the sixth century CE, during a war between the Ethiopian Christian king, Kaleb, and the Yemenite king, Joseph Dhu-Nuwas, a convert to Judaism. Yet, another proposes that they are descendants of the Agaw tribe, who adopted Judaism in the fifteenth century CE. And there are many others.

Ethiopian Jews had a form of Judaism that showed traces of Israelite practices, without the Rabbinic Pharisee addition. They had lost Hebrew. Their biblical text, the *Orit*, is translated from the Septuagint into Ge'ez – a semitic language with some traces of Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic. Only the Kahanim/Qessotch/Priests can read and understand Ge'ez. *Qessotch* were not necessarily kohanim; rather they can be thought of as the equivalent to rabbis as they were the most learned in their communities. The Beta Israel maintained a form of Shabbat, kosher, and family purity, as well as many of the holidays, but did not follow any festivals established after the First Temple period – in other words, no mention of Purim or Chanukah. In fact, there were many communities who did not know that the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed.

One of the most notable aspects of the Ethiopian Jewish experience is the Sigd festival, celebrated 50 days after Yom Kippur. The holiday is unique to the Beta Israel. Following the traditions of Yom

Kippur, the festival is meant as a day of fasting, purity and renewal. However, it is not meant to mimic Yom Kippur, but rather enhance upon that experience. If Yom Kippur is a day of personal introspection, Sigd is meant as a time for communal reflection.

With preparations being done the week before, and celebrations often being carried out for a couple of days after, the main event is on the 29th of Heshvan. Those who lived in smaller villages would stay by family members in the larger villages so that during Sigd they could all be together. The *qessotch* would choose a high point upon which the community would ascend and prepare by placing stones in a circle with a special table to hold the holy books in the center, at the top of the chosen mountain.

On the 29th of Heshvan (a month that in most of the Jewish world is known as *mar* Heshvan, or bitter Heshvan, as it is a month without holidays) the Beta Israel would wake up early, dip in the river and dress in holiday clothes. The *qessotch* would take the *Orit* from the ark and carry it to the mountain. The rest of the community would likewise ascend the mountain, carrying holy books or stones on their heads. According to some, the stones represent the tablets given at Mt. Sinai.

At the top of the mountain, the *qessotch* would unravel the *Orit* and the high priest would enter a circle of stones. He would then read texts that included Exodus 19-20 (ceremony at Mount Sinai) and Nehemia 8 (Covenant Ceremony). The holy texts are called "Mashafa Kadus" by the Beta Israel.

Both texts remind us that the traditions of the Sigd have Biblical references. Where Moses went to the top of the mountain, Mt. Sinai, from which the community heard holy texts, the Beta Israel perform a similar ritual during this holiday. Just as Shavuoth is celebrated on the 50th day after Pesach, Sigd is celebrated on the 50th day after Yom Kippur as a commemoration of the giving of the Torah. Rabbi Dr. Sharon Shalom asserts that Sigd is actually an ancient Jewish holiday that was forgotten in other communities.

The community would atone for their sins after the texts were read, and bow before God, just as the Jewish people did in the times of Ezra and Nehemia. Sigd revolves around the renewal of the covenant, just as the covenant was renewed in Nehemia 8.

"וַיְבָרֶךְ עֶזְרָא אֶת יְהוָה הָאֱלֹהִים הַגָּדוֹל וַיַּעֲבֹד כָּל הָעָם אָמֵן אָמֵן בְּמַעַל יְדֵיהֶם וַיִּקְדּוּ וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּ לַיהוָה אֲפִים
אָרְצָה. - נחמיה ח:ו"

"And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. And all the people answered: 'Amen, Amen,' with the lifting up of their hands; and they bowed their heads and fell down before the LORD with their faces to the ground." - Nehemia 8:6

In fact, this element is so significant in the holiday that the name itself refers to it. Sigd in its Semitic root means prostration.

At the end of the ceremony, the Beta Israel would blow trumpets and declare "לשנה הבאה" "בירושלים", for their desire to celebrate in Jerusalem next year. The *qessotch* would bless the crowd and distribute *dabbo*, a special bread, and *talla*, a type of beer, to the community. They would then descend the mountain, dancing and singing along the way.

When the Beta Israel arrived in Israel, there was debate over whether to continue the celebration as they had finally arrived to the Holy Land. It was decided that as long as the Temple is not built, they would continue. The community, however, was split as to where to perform the celebrations. A majority continue to do so on a high point in the landscape, most notably the Armon Hanetziv

promenade in Jerusalem, from which one can see the Western Wall. A smaller percentage, mainly those from the Tigray Province in Ethiopia celebrate at the Western Wall itself.

In 2008, Israel recognized Sigd as a national holiday. This became a sign of further integration of the Ethiopian experience into the larger Jewish experience. The largest celebration of Sigd in Israel today is at Armon Hanetziv, where state dignitaries join – including the president and prime minister. Today the festival is kept more symbolically, with individuals fasting until midday. However, the ascension with the *Orit* and the reading of the texts is still done before a crowd of Ethiopians as well as Jews of other origins.

Questions for Discussion

1. As Sigd is a day of fraternal love, unity, and the formation of the covenant with the God of Israel and Jerusalem, is there a place for expanding the holiday today to other communities?
2. What are the parallels and distinctions between Sigd and Shavuoth?

Suggested Readings

Ben-Dor, Shoshana. "The Sigd of Beta Israel: Testimony to a community in transition." *Ethiopian Jews and Israel* (1987): 140-59.

Shalom, Sharon. *From Sinai to Ethiopia: The Halakhic and Conceptual World of Ethiopian Jewry*. Gefen Publishing House, New York: 2016.