

**NACOEJ CURRICULUM
ETHIOPIAN JEWS ARE PART OF THE WORLDWIDE
JEWISH COMMUNITY**

**HOLIDAYS, FESTIVALS AND FASTS OF THE ETHIOPIAN JEWS
-RESOURCE INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS-**

THE LUNAR AND JEWISH CALENDAR

The Beta Israel generally celebrate all the festivals mentioned in the Torah, in addition to those of its own traditions. The timing of the holidays is determined according to the community's own religious lunar calendar. The Jewish calendar used in the Diaspora is unknown to Beta Israel, and the community is ignorant of both the Jewish leap-year calendations and the traditional account of the years since creation. However, the festivals mentioned in the Torah fall on dates very close to those celebrated by the rest of world Jewry. The names of some of the lunar months have been preserved, essentially corresponding to the Hebrew versions with minor changes, e.g., Lissan (Nissan), Tomas (Tammuz), Ab (Av), Lul (Elul), Tahasrein (Tishri), Tabt (Tevet).

-HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS:

ROSH HASHANA (NEW YEAR)

Berhan Saraka, "The Rising Light", falls on the first day of the seventh month (the months are counted from Nissan). Despite the fact that it is described in the Torah as an occasion for trumpeting, and Jews throughout the world blow the shofar, the Beta Israel say they have forgotten the way to sound it and to prepare it from a ram's horn. Instead, they beat drums and cymbals. Berhan Saraka is also known as Ba'ala Matka, "the Festival of Trumpets". The prayers mention both the blowing of the shofar and the binding of Isaac, which traditionally occurred on that day. Rosh Hashana celebrations last one day, as set down in the Torah. Work is totally forbidden on Berhan Saraka, except for the preparation of food--collecting fruits, lighting a fire, cooking, etc.

YOM KIPPUR (DAY OF ATONEMENT)

The days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are for repentance and supplication, during which the Cahenat and elders customarily fast. In practice, the preparations start at the beginning of Elul; the community Cahenat customarily fast on the first ten days of Elul and the day before Rosh Hashana. Yom Kippur, known as Ba'ala Astarai in the Beta Israel Torah, (written in Geez), but more commonly known as Ba'ala Astarai (Day of Atonement) falls on the tenth of Tishri. It lasts one day, from evening to evening, and everyone fasts, including children over the age of seven. As the holiday comes in, members of the community appeal to one another for forgiveness and spend most of the holiday praying--even praying at night.

The order of prayer includes a memorial service.

The expression in Leviticus 16:29 "... ye shall afflict your souls ..." is interpreted by the community as an obligation to suffer physical affliction. Some members of the community, therefore, try to stay awake all night. Rhythmic jumping up and down during and between prayers is another common way of experiencing affliction. At the end of the day it is customary to scatter seeds for the birds, as a symbol of the departed souls which have been commemorated during the day. It is also a sign that God has received the prayers. There is a difference of opinion concerning the baking and eating of the obligatory maswaet or baraketeh loaf when Yom Kippur falls on the Sabbath. Some prepare it and taste a little (or give some to the children), some do not bake at all, and others bake it and eat it at night after the fast is over. At the end of the day the women bring drink and pastries to the synagogue, where the fast is broken. The Cahen gives his blessing to the feast, which lasts joyfully until late at night.

SUCCOT (TABERNACLES)

Succot (Tabernacles), known as, Ba'ala Masalat, "Festival of Shade" (i.e., the thatching of the booth) falls on the 15th of Tishri and is celebrated for eight days. The commandment to build and live in a booth is found in Beta Israel tradition; the structure is erected beside the house or synagogue. Where no booths are built, the year-long dwelling, made entirely of trees, is itself considered to be one. The tradition of the Four Species has not been preserved; the Cahenat say they cannot get the species, which are rare in Ethiopia, specified in the Torah. Succot is the harvest festival. Portions of the new crop, such as corn and pepper, which ripen at that time, are brought to the synagogue for the Cahen's blessing.

Creative labor is forbidden throughout the eight days of Succot; the time is spent offering praise and prayers. At the same time, fire may be used for cooking and corn may be picked. Travel between villages for visits is permitted. The first and eighth days are considered more festive than the others, because they open and close the holiday.

PURIM (THE FESTIVAL OF LOTS)

Purim is mentioned in the Scroll of Esther, which is part of the general Beta Israel biblical canon. However, the rejoicing and drinking mentioned in the Scroll are not included in their celebrations. Some Cahenat have explained that the hardship and pressure which the community suffered for many years did not make celebration of such joyous occasions possible. On the other hand, the Cahenet and elders fast for three days (eating only at night) in memory of the Fast of Esther which the Jews of Shushan observed in this manner. The date of the fast, which is less strictly observed these days, is unclear; some fast on the 11th, others on the 12th or 13th of the 11th month, counting from Nissan.

PESACH / PASSOVER / FASIKA

On the fourteenth day of "Lissan"--i.e., Nissan--the Paschal sacrifice is offered on a stone altar near the synagogue. During the seven days of Fasika, no food or drink containing leaven may be consumed. Houses are cleaned and all remaining leaven is burned long before the holiday; dishes are exchanged or new earthenware dishes made. In addition to the five species of grain and certain forms of legume, fermented foods, such as milk that has been left to stand, are not consumed, nor are other milk products apart from fresh milk. A special matza-kitta, similar to the hand-made matza customary in Israel--is baked for Pesach. On the eve of the fifteenth of Lissan, the Paschal sacrifice, which has been roasted over an open fire, is eaten; care is taken not to break any of its bones. The Cahenat tell the story of the Exodus. The rules concerning labor during Succot apply during Pesach week. Once the holiday is over, beer is brewed and bread is baked. The first portions are given to the Cahen.

The origins of Passover in the Bible came at the time the Jews left their period of slavery in Egypt. The Jewish people were still unified. Therefore, Passover is a universal Jewish holiday. While the basic tenets of Passover are fundamental, variations in customs and traditions may be found in different countries and cultures. Examples include: Ethiopian Jews have the Cahenat tell the story; other Jews use a printed Hagada. Iranian Jews sit on oriental carpets on the floor, in contrast to European Jews, who sit in armchairs at the table with pillows to lean against. Sephardic Jews walk around the Seder table with sticks and filled bandanas over their shoulders to reenact their leaving Egypt. Ethiopian Jews break chometz dishes while Ashkenazi Jews follow a precise procedure to search for chometz the night before Passover and announce an annulment of chometz the next morning. As Ethiopian Jews encounter other Jewish populations they have modified some practices.

SHAVOUT (THE FESTIVAL OF WEEKS)

According to Rabbinical tradition, Shavuot is celebrated on the 50th day after the first day of Pesach: "And ye shall count unto you from the morrow after the day of rest ... even unto the morrow after the seventh week shall ye number 50 days ..." (Leviticus 23:15-16). The community, however, interprets the "day of rests" as the seventh day of Pesach, and accordingly Shavuot, known as, Ba'ala Maerrar or Maerrar, "festival of the grain harvest", falls on the 50th day following the day after the end of Pesach. This day, the 12th day of the third month (again counting from Nissan) is considered to be the day the Torah was given. Portions of the new crop and the maswaet festival loaf are brought to the synagogue; the Cahen blesses both.

-OTHER BETA ISRAEL FESTIVALS

Beta Israel tradition designates additional days for special festivities and cessation of labor: On every **Rosh Hodesh** (day of the New Moon), work is halted and there is a special prayer service. The first of Nissan is the **Festival of Lissan**, when maswaet is baked, sheep are slaughtered and special prayers are recited.

The 10th of every month is designated in remembrance of **Yom Kippur**.

The 12th of every month is designated in remembrance of **Shavuot**.

The 15th of every month is in remembrance of **Pesach** and **Succot**.

The 12th day of the ninth month is a harvest festival, a reminder of **Shavuot**, which falls on the 12th day of the third month. This holiday is adapted to the Ethiopian harvest seasons.

On these days, no work is done, and prayers are recited. They are not, however, considered as holy as the festivals mentioned in the Torah. The anniversaries of the deaths of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are commemorated on the 18th day of the sixth month. The sacred Beta Israel writings about their lives--Gadla Avraham, Gadla Ishak and Gadla Ya'kov--are read.

The 29th day of the eighth month (Heshvan) is set aside for a mass congregational festival called **Seged**. Before daybreak, the villagers gather together in one place. In the morning, still fasting, they climb a mountaintop, led by their Cahenet, holding the Orit. As they climb, they prostrate themselves repeatedly. Once at the top, the Cahenat stand, facing Jerusalem, within a circular enclosure and read from the Torah, adding sections of Ezra, Nehemia and other books. The congregation recites prayers and remembers the dead. The Cahenat give sermons on preserving Torah and tradition. The entire congregation returns to the village in the afternoon; there the fast is joyfully broken with roasted (sacrificial) beef and delicacies, and there is dancing in celebration.

According to the Cahenat, this holiday originated in the days of Ezra and Nehemia, at the time when all the Jews assembled in Jerusalem, and, by fasting and confessing, made a covenant with God to uphold the Torah and to dissociate themselves from the gentiles in their midst (see Nehemiah (9-10)). **Seged** also has a symbolic significance in recalling the covenant into which the Israelites entered when they received the Torah at Mount Sinai. This ancient Jewish holiday was unknown to all other Jewish communities around the world. Ethiopian-Israelis now celebrate **Seged** in Israel.

NOTE: CHANUKAH is not a holiday celebrated by Beta Israel, since it commemorates an event that had not yet happened historically at the time of the Diaspora, when the Beta Israel lost contact with other Jewish communities.

FASTS

In addition to **Yom Kippur**, there are many fast days in the tradition of Beta Israel. In practice, however, these are observed chiefly by the Cahenet and the most pious community elders. Fasts last from sunrise until sunset. Mondays and Thursdays throughout the year are days of fasting for atonement and repentance, as is the day before **Rosh Hodesh** (day of the New Moon).

The 14th of Nissan (the day before Pesach) is the Passover fast, not only for the first-born.

Beta Israel fast during the first nine days of **Tomas** (Tammuz, the fourth month) in mourning over the conquest of Jerusalem and destruction of the First Temple. Fasting is also practiced during the first 17 days of **Av**, in memory of the destruction of Jerusalem. The first 10 days of **Lul** (Elul, the sixth month) are set aside for fasting in preparation for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. The tenth day, recalling **Yom Kippur**, is of special importance. The day before **Rosh Hashana** and the interval between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are also marked by fasts of atonement and repentance.

As noted above, the entire community fasts on the first half of **Seged**. The three-day **Fast of Esther**, like most of the others, is a custom reserved exclusively for Cahenet and exceedingly pious individuals.

PASSOVER/FASIKA: A FIRST-PERSON STORY*

“To begin with, everything had to be new for Passover, all the utensils and, if one could afford it, all the clothing and even the bedding. We didn’t buy anything from the Christians, nothing in the market, but we made everything ourselves. It meant a lot of work for the women, at least for two or three months before Passover, because all these new things had to be made by hand—we made the new pottery and other utensils and wove fresh cloth for garments.

On the eve of Passover, at four or five in the afternoon, the Kes (priest) visited all the houses to make sure there was no chametz (food items forbidden on Passover). It meant great shame for the housewife if the Kes found something not clean or not right. Everything had to be ready, perfect for the holiday—and the Kes’s visit. Also before Passover, in the afternoon, all the villagers went down to the river to clean themselves and the children. It was a bit like going to the mikveh (ritualarium).

And then, everything was ready for the Seder. Our Seder was quite different from the European ones, where everyone sits at a nice table and eats so much food. We sat outside, on the ground, older men in one group, older women in another.

At the Seder, the elders discussed the story of the Exodus. They taught it especially to the children, and asked questions. But it was all oral—printed Haggadoth (prayer books containing the Seder service) from Israel reached us only in the last few years.

The first day of Passover was very important, very special. We prayed in the synagogue and the elders taught the Haggadah, orally, of course. But that is not all: no work whatsoever was done by anyone for the entire seven days, except for preparing food for immediate consumption.

It all added up to a real feeling of Passover. There was much immediacy, with all of us sitting outside together in the moonlight, as though we were living in the Exodus.”

Malka Avraham from Gondar Province

*Excerpts from “Passover in Ethiopia,” by Michelle Ratzersdorf, Amit Women magazine, March – April, 1991

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