

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

**TOPIC 3: A JEWISH LIFE CYCLE EVENT*: THE BETA ISRAEL
TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE CEREMONY AND
CELEBRATION**

-TEACHERS' INFORMATIONAL RESOURCE-

Childbirth separations and circumcision of boys on the eighth day are the start of life cycle events. Ceremonies for weddings or the purification of mothers after childbirth, and solemn occasions such as funerals or tazkar (commemoration of the dead), unite all members of the community in special feasts and prayer services led by the Cahen or the bebtara (chief religious official). Family members and relatives arrive for these events from even the most distant villages.

Family quarrels are settled by the village elders, led by Cahanet. Each family has its own Cahen, who gives advice on religious matters. Confessions are made to him and he decides how the party in question may atone for sins or compensate for a broken promise. The family has a patriarchal structure, and honor of adults and elders is highly valued.

MARRIAGE

Beta Israel has managed to maintain the religious framework of the family unit and high standards of personal morality in the village environment. When a boy reaches adulthood—usually after the age of eighteen—his parents seek out a suitable girl, usually older than thirteen years old. The matchmaking and initial contact are handled by the fathers of the prospective bride and groom. Gifts are exchanged; jewels are given to the bride's family, who are blessed by the Cahenat and the elders, while the parents of the bride-to-be give the groom cattle or similar gifts.

The two families celebrate three days before the wedding, each in its respective village. On the eve of the wedding, the bride applies red dye to her fingernails, palms and feet, during a special ceremony for which sheep are slaughtered. At the same time, the groom and his family move to a hut built for this purpose and he is blessed by the Cahenat. At this point the Kesherah (tying) ceremony begins.

The Kesherah is either a cord or band painted white and red, or two cords of those colors. White symbolizes the groom's purity; red denotes that of the bride (the blood of virginity). The Cahen places the Kesherah at the groom's feet and then leads it upward past the knees to the heart, finally tying it to the groom's forehead. After this, the Cahenat and congregation honor the groom with song and dance.

After the Kesherah rite, the groom's entourage (with the groom himself riding a horse or mule) walk to the bride's village bearing gifts. Here a large tukul (hut) has been erected, where the bride and her close friends await the marriage ceremony. Upon arrival of the groom's entourage, the marriage ceremony begins in the bride's tukul. After marriage terms are concluded, a certificate of marriage, similar to the standard Jewish Ketuba, is written with a copy each for the groom, the bride and the officiating Cahen. This is done in the presence of the Cahenat and witnesses. The groom and bride sign the document in separate tukuls. The document is also signed by two witnesses, the community Cahen and a special guarantor who is trusted by both sides and has followed all stages of the marriage arrangements. The bride's father accepts his daughter's gifts from the groom.

After the marriage document has been signed, the bride is brought from her home to the tukul where the groom and all the guests are waiting. The Cahen delivers a sermon about marriage and blesses the new couple: "Be fruitful and multiply." The bride's parents bid their daughter farewell in a rite at which they sob, but shed no tears. The couple then set out for the groom's village. The wedding celebration lasts seven days, after which the newlyweds enter their own tukul and spend seven days together, alone in their tukul, to begin their married life.

One of the characteristics of a Jewish marriage is for the couple to be, alone, together in a separate place for seven days after their wedding ceremony; Maimonides considers this act of being alone together in a separate space, to constitute actual marriage.

**See Teachers' Resource Information: Holidays, Festivals and Fasts of Ethiopian Jews;*

Teachers' Resource Information: Religious Practices of Ethiopian Jews