

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

**RELIGIOUS PRACTICES OF ETHIOPIAN JEWS**

**-RESOURCE INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS-**

In Ethiopia three structures set Beta Israel villages apart from others: the synagogue (mesgid) and two shelters, one for menstruating women and another for childbearing women. In the synagogue, there are weekday services, usually attended by the Cahen, the village elders and those who are not engaged in work. The entire community attends Sabbath and Festival services and other religious events. Ethiopian Jews of the village conduct their religious lives under the guidance of religious leaders or elders. Every large village or group of small ones has a Kes, the spiritual leader of the community (not descended from Aaron), whose function parallels that of a rabbi. The title Kes is awarded only after studies and examinations culminating in ordination by the veteran Cahenet (priests--plural of Cahen). The Cahen also carries out the same tasks as the others, but his job is to conduct all the religious affairs of his community and to teach the Torah and its commandments. The community members provide for the Cahen with various gifts and donations from their harvests and possessions. The bebtara works with the Cahen, assisting in prayer services, studies and the like. In the absence of a Cahen, or together with him, an elder sage, blessed with natural leadership ability, known as, talik shmagla, serves as community leader.

The Beta Israel live in accordance with the Laws of Moses, while at the same time carrying out Jewish tradition in their own unique way. Their special customs are primarily a result of the community's total isolation from the rest of world Jewry and centers of learning since roughly the early Second Temple period. The preservation of Jewish tradition for such a long period is remarkable.

Beta Israel religious life is based on the Written Law and oral interpretations as well as standard interpretations, as passed down from generation to generation, of the community's own holy writings. Some of the customs are equivalent to Jewish practices based on Oral Law and rabbinic literature; others resemble ancient customs practiced in Israel during the Biblical and Talmudic periods.

The Beta Israel's centuries of isolation and hardship led to a blurring of the commandments, even though they are explicit in the Torah. Thus mitzvot, such as tzitzit, tefillin, mezuzah, sounding of the shofar on Rosh Hashana, the Four Species on Succot and others have disappeared. Hebrew print and language, too, are no longer found in either the writings of the community or its speech. Numerous commandments survive in their basic form but are vastly different in their details and provisions from the practices known in rabbinical tradition.

Religious life has its roots in the Law of Moses. Beta Israel believe in the Lord God of Israel, the absolute oneness of God, and that the Jews are chosen on the basis of the Law given at Mount Sinai. Beta Israel share the Jewish beliefs regarding reward and punishment, the afterworld, resurrection of the dead and the subsequent coming of the Messiah (known as Theodorus), return to Zion and the ingathering of the exiles.

Although all members of the community are involved in religious life, only the Cahenet and their close associates among the elders know the explanations and sources for the commandments and traditions. Even the Cahenet themselves rarely have more than a small sample of holy writings and prayer books. The literature did not reach them. The holy writings are in Geez. Geez is a Semitic language, once spoken in ancient Abyssinia. In current times it is used exclusively for prayer and holy writings. The holiest work is the Torah, called the Orit (i.e., oraita, "Torah" in Aramaic). All the holy writings, including the Torah, are hand-written on parchment pages, which are assembled into a book rather than a scroll. The rest of the Prophets and the Hagiographa are of secondary importance. A number of the "external" writings--the books of Hanoah, Jubilees, Baruch and the books of Ezra--are held sacred as well. The basic wording of Beta Israel biblical writings was passed down and incorporates some of the Apocrypha as well.

A book of special importance for the leaders of the community is *Te'ezaza Sanbat* ("Precepts of the Sabbath"). Liturgical works include weekday services, Sabbath and Festival prayers, and the wordings of the various blessing: *Sefer Cahen* deals with priestly functions, while *Sefer Sa'atat* ("Book of the Hours") applies to weekdays and the Sabbath. It is assumed that in the past, the community had other writings, perhaps even in Hebrew. However, the wars and persecution of the Middle Ages exacted their toll on the holy writings as well.

### **TE' EZAZA SANBAT (PRECEPTS OF THE SABBATH)**

“These are the commandments of the Sabbath that I wrote for thee, and all the laws and prescriptions of the Sabbath:

“Six days shall thou labor, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord, your God. In it you shall do no work, neither you, nor your women, nor your sons, nor your daughters, nor your menservants, nor your maidservants, nor your cattle, nor your family, nor the strangers that are with you. He who labors in it shall die. He who draws water from a streaming spring or who argues or curses or blasphemes on that day shall die. He who prepares not on Friday what he will eat, drink, or give (on the Sabbath), he who lies shall die. He who carries anything, he who takes something from his tent or brings something into it, shall die. You shall do no work whatever on the Sabbath but (use) that which you prepared (on Friday). Sabbath is the day on which to eat, to be satiated, to be filled with drink, to rest, to study, to lie down, to be quiet, to celebrate, and to worship without doing any work.”

## **PRAYERS AND SYNOGOGUE**

Religious life revolves around the mesgid or beit makdas--the synagogue--which is stronger and more impressive than the other village huts. The mesgid is generally divided into two sections, with an inner sanctum, kadesta kedusan (reminiscent of the Hebrew kodesh kodashim, the Holy of Holies) for the Cahenet and their aides, and where the Orit (Torah) is sometimes kept.

Worshippers remove their shoes before entering the synagogue. Only priests are required to cover their heads. Women who come to the services congregate either in a separate area on the side of, or behind, some sort of partition. Prayers are fervently recited, facing Jerusalem, to the rhythm of a special prayer dance that is accompanied with gestures, prostration, the beating of drums and cymbals, and community singing.

The service is conducted in Geez, a language known only to the Cahenet and their aides. The congregation recites the prayers either by heart or, occasionally, from prayer books; participation is mainly passive, apart from "Amens" and the singing of well-known passages.

There are three weekday services: one at the break of dawn before work, another roughly at midday and the third at dusk. Only the elders and those not working attend. The Sabbath and festivals are honored with additional services, which are attended by the entire community. The synagogue also serves for other religious gatherings, sermons and readings from the Orit.

Apart from the fixed services, short blessings and prayers are recited on special occasions. For example, blessings are made before and after meals, for travel, upon arrival and departure of a guest, in commemoration of departed loved ones and upon circumcision, marriage and purification of mothers. In general, matters of prayers and blessings occupy a central place in the service of God.

Most of the blessings begin with Itbarech Egzi'evchar Amlak Israel ("May the Lord, God of Israel, be blessed ...") and continue Amlak z'chol shag uzchol munfas ("God of all flesh and all spirit"). After these opening phrases comes the body of the blessing or prayer. There are prayers expressing thanks and praise, to a large extent derived from the Psalms and other Biblical books.

## **THE ALTAR AND SACRIFICE**

Beta Israel tradition includes animal sacrifice as part of its service, though this practice has largely died out now. The only commonly practiced sacrifice is the Paschal offering, made on the fourteenth of Nissan on a stone altar near the synagogue. As a rule, the status of the Kes--community Cahen--is equivalent to that of a rabbi, but similar in many ways to that of the Cohen in the Temple (though the Cahen is not a direct descendant of Aaron). The Ethiopian Jews mention the holiness of Jerusalem and the Temple when performing their sacrificial rites.

## THE SABBATH

The sanctity of the Sabbath, observed on the seventh day, is meticulously preserved in Beta Israel customs. Preparations--laundry, bathing, ritual immersion--begin on Thursday. The women prepare food set aside for the holy Sabbath only after they have immersed themselves in a river or another body of water. Work stops at midday on Friday. Homes are tidied and cleaned in preparation for the holy day. Members of the community wash and immerse themselves, and dress in their Sabbath clothes.

Before sunset, stoves are extinguished and the embers even have water poured on them, so that no flame remains for cooking on the Sabbath, in accordance with Exodus 35:3, "Ye shall kindle no fire throughout your habitations on the Sabbath day". Food kept for the Sabbath is therefore eaten cold, unless it has been buried before the beginning of the Sabbath, while it was still warm. The laws of Beta Israel forbid any form of labor, including cooking, on the Sabbath. Fire may not be used to keep food warm, even if it is actually cooked previously. There is, however, a custom which allows a flame lit only for purposes of illumination to continue to burn on the Sabbath night until the flame dies out by itself. For this purpose there is a special candle used only on the Sabbath. In earlier days, the candle was made from beeswax. However, since beeswax was forbidden in the Temple, candles for synagogue use are made of grasses.

More recently, gas lanterns came into use to serve the same purpose. Their flames may not be touched, and once the wicks have died out, the lanterns may not be moved or touched. Lighting these lanterns is not mandatory, and if hardship and poverty prevent it, such flames are not lit. At sunset, the Sabbath is welcomed and the evening service begins, with full attendance by village members.

On the Sabbath morning, the Cahenet and the elders rise early for early morning service, and are joined later by the rest of the community. After the prayers, there is a special communal feast. As a sort of holiday offering, every woman bakes a special Sabbath loaf for her family. It is called maswaet ("gift offering to God") or baraketeh ("blessing") and a drink similar to beer is drunk with it. The delicacies are brought to the synagogue and after the service the Cahenet recite a blessing over the bread and cut it in a special way. The families then eat together and join in festive singing. They wish each other Sanbat salam--Shabbat shalom.

During the Sabbath, there are additional prayers and another Sabbath meal. The Orit is read, usually in the local language, and the Cahenet gives a sermon on matters of faith and commandments.

For the Jews of Ethiopia, all Sabbath work prohibitions carry equal weight. In practical terms, all labor in the house and field is strictly forbidden until the stars mark the end of the Sabbath. No one leaves the village and a special robe is worn, with neither belt nor sash, so that no knots are tied as they would be on a weekday. The sanctity of the Sabbath is interpreted as a concept similar to the sanctity of the Temple; the women, therefore, prepare Sabbath foods only after bathing and ritual immersion. When an infant boy reaches the age of eight days on the Sabbath, his circumcision is postponed to Sunday. However, self-defense is permitted when Beta Israel faces attack on the Sabbath..

The Sabbaths are divided into cycles of seven. A special prayer, is recited at sunset and reflects the particular characteristics of each Sabbath. The seventh Sabbath--Legata Sanbat--is the holiest of all, and there are extra prayers, festivities and a special sanctification service. The Sabbath is strictly observed by everyone in Beta Israel villages.

## **KASHRUT**

Beta Israel keeps strictly to the dietary restrictions of the Torah. Its customs in this regard are fundamentally similar to those of Jews everywhere, although there exist many differences in the details. The only meat eaten is that of animals that are kosher according to both stipulations of the Torah and Beta Israel's own kashrut traditions.

The Cahen, or another specially trained community member, slaughters the animal by making an incision at the neck. The animal's head is turned towards Jerusalem, and before striking the blow, the Cahen recites a special blessing to God which includes the Ten Commandments. The initial flow of blood is channeled into a trench in the ground, where it is covered. The blood which remains is drained in a special manner. After skin and arteries have been removed, the carcass is cut up into extremely small parts. These chunks are immersed in salt water and the juice of dough, or some other liquid, and are washed thoroughly. The pieces are then hung up to dry out any remaining blood. An alternative method is to pour boiling water on the meat a number of times.

According to Jewish law, if an animal has not been slaughtered according to halacha, no part of it may be eaten. Beta Israel interpret this to include uncooked meat, and therefore all meat must be cooked or grilled before it is eaten. The sinew of the femoral vein (Heb. gid ha-nasheh) and certain portions of fat are carefully removed.

Concepts of trefut--the circumstances under which a given piece of meat may not be eaten--are vague and lack many details from rabbinical tradition. Meat and milk are not cooked together, nor is meat prepared in a container used for milk. The other laws concerning the separation of meat and milk, practiced by Jews in the rest of the world, date from a later time and are therefore not known to Beta Israel. Poultry is not considered in the meat category. Foodstuffs which gentiles have cooked or even touched are considered impure and forbidden.

## **RITUAL PURITY AND IMPURITY**

Customs of ritual purity and impurity are of great importance. The Jews of Ethiopia avoid all contact with impurity and their villages are therefore situated near bodies of water in which the many purification immersions take place. Apart from purification by immersion, the Jews of Ethiopia practice mai manzeh--the sprinkling of "water of purification" (cf. Numbers 19:19)--to cleanse one of contact with a corpse. This custom, which was observed until recently, required that spring water be mixed with the ashes of a cremated red heifer, slaughtered by the Cahenet in a manner prescribed in the Torah. At one time, those who became impure due to contact with a human corpse--e.g., by having carried a corpse--or having assisted in its burial--sat outside the village for seven days and did not return home until receiving mai manzeh on the third and seventh days and then immersing themselves. Since it has become increasingly difficult to obtain the ashes of a red heifer, many Ethiopian Jews no longer follow the procedure exactly.

Non-Jews are considered impure; they are not touched, their food is not eaten, and they are not admitted into Jewish homes. This has prevented close relationships and consequent lack of assimilation. In the event that a Jew is rendered impure, he may not enter his own home until he has immersed himself in a river.

When women and young, unmarried girls sense the beginning of menstruation, they go immediately to a special shelter--yadam gojo ("shelter of blood")--where they remain for seven days. Relatives either bring food on special dishes or set it down in front of them, so that the dishes used by the rest of the community are not made impure. The boundary, which ritually pure Jews may not cross, is marked out around the hut in stones. On the seventh day, after the flow of blood has stopped, the woman prepares herself for immersion by cutting her hair (this is not always done), cutting her fingernails, cleansing herself thoroughly and washing her clothes. She immerses herself at nightfall, usually in the company of a friend who sees that she has immersed completely. She then returns to her own home.

When a pregnant woman goes into labor, she retires to the "shelter of blood". She remains there with her newborn child until the eighth day (after bearing a son) or the fourteenth day after bearing a daughter). She remains separate from the community for forty days after the birth of a son or eighty days after the birth of a daughter. Upon her return to the community, she undergoes a purification ceremony.

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