



Protected from the Jerusalem morning sun by traditional parasols, *Kesotch* chant the beautiful Sigd liturgy while fasting with the community.



Robed in white, Ethiopian-Israeli women hold their hands out prayerfully at the Sigd in Jerusalem. All will break their fast when Sigd ends in the afternoon.

## At the Sigd...

Last year, about six weeks before the Sigd, a number of Ethiopian community organizations, youth movements and educational groups gathered together to discuss what could be done to make the occasion more meaningful for the Ethiopian-Israeli youth who come, but are not really part of it.

Many are brought by boarding schools, others come with their parents, are happy to meet friends, but have no connection to the religious aspects of this unique Ethiopian Jewish holiday. Even though some schools give lessons about the significance of Sigd, the event itself has elements that are difficult for the youth to relate to. This is especially true of the main element, the many prayers sung by the *Kesotch* (priests) in *Ge'ez* (ancient Ethiopic), which in modern times is no longer spoken but is the language of religious texts and prayers.

A number of those participating in the meeting, which was called by the Israel Association for Ethiopian Jews, with which NACOEJ works closely, offered to set up tents or activity centers on the Jerusalem Promenade, near the stage upon which the *Kesotch* stood praying.

Each activity was designed to draw youth and others. Shoshana Ben-Dor, our educational director in Israel, who has made an extensive study of the liturgy of Beta Israel in *Ge'ez*, agreed to set up a NACOEJ tent where she would teach a number of the prayers, using both transliterations of the texts and translations.

"I knew that very few members of the community understand *Ge'ez*,

and as I believe in the importance of the event as a religious holiday, it is important to me that the community understands the meaning of the prayers."

With the help of Kassahun Wendie, NACOEJ-Israel Outreach Director, Shoshana set up her tent on the day of Sigd, with copies of the prayers (as well as informational booklets about NACOEJ), and taught individuals and groups.

"I started at 11:30 and kept going until about 2:30. I believe I gave five rounds of teaching, both prayers and information about the religious life of the Ethiopian Jewish community in Ethiopia." Not only Ethiopian youngsters learned with her, so did young leaders of the community, college students, soldiers and others working with the community, as well as journalists and visitors.

The Sigd is held 50 days after Yom Kippur, and is based on the covenant renewal event described in the book of Nehemiah, carried out soon after the return to Zion of the Babylonian exiles.

The day consists of an elaborate prayer service, Torah readings about the giving of the Ten Commandments and other sections, as well as chapter nine of Nehemiah, and a number of other rituals tied to the day. "Before the Sigd is turned into a festival devoid of its traditional religious significance, it is important for the community to get to know its traditional content," Shoshana says.

"The only thing I am sorry about, is that I spent the whole day teaching and never really got to the Sigd."

*Editorial note: This year, the Sigd took place on November 8th. Shoshana taught again. ■*



In a traditional Ethiopian dress, Shoshana Ben-Dor explains the liturgy at Sigd. Ethiopian-Israelis regard Shoshana as one of their community.