

NACOEJ CURRICULUM

ETHIOPIAN JEWS ARE PART OF THE WORLDWIDE JEWISH COMMUNITY

INFORMATIONAL NARRATIVE FOR CURRICULUM TOPICS* -RESOURCE INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS-

#1

My name is Yodit (Judith) Assefa. I am Jewish. I grew up in Ethiopia, but came with my family to Israel in its 1984 rescue-airlift called Operation Moses . We are now settled in the Haifa area where we are members of a large population of Ethiopian-Israelis. Ethiopian Jews have a long history that I want to tell you about.

My ancestors lived for centuries in a village near Gondar in the north-western part of Ethiopia. The Jewish community in Ethiopia is called the Beta Israel or House of Israel. As a child, I was curious about how Jews settled in that remote part of the country. I listened carefully when our rabbis, known as Kessim, told us the story of our origins. Since ours was an oral culture - we did not have books to learn from, our elders memorized our texts, and laws, history and legends of our origins and told us accounts of our beginnings in Ethiopia. There are several theories about our origins.

#2

For example, I have heard accounts of how Jews migrated to Ethiopia after the fall of the First Temple about 586 BCE. According to another story, Jewish merchants entered Ethiopia from Yemen in the south and converted a black Cushite tribe, the Agaw, to Judaism and started a Jewish kingdom in Africa.

Yet, another story says some Jews did not cross from Egypt to Israel, at the time of the Exodus, but traveled over hundreds of years through Egypt. Then they proceeded up along the Nile River to the north-western part of Ethiopia to Lake Tana.

In the 8th century BCE, Israel consisted of twelve tribes. Ten of them lived in territory in the north. Also, in the 8th century BCE, the powerful kingdom of the Assyrians invaded the north and conquered the Israelites. The ten tribes were scattered into many different regions. One of those tribes was the tribe of Dan. Our elders tell us they are the “lost tribe” of Israel that migrated into Ethiopia at the time to escape from the Assyrians. They settled in the Gondar region where I was born and where the Beta Israel live.

I have also been told the story of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba's visit to him in Jerusalem about 900 BCE and of the birth of their son Menelik. It is said, Menelik left Jerusalem with a thousand of the first born sons of the Israelites' Elders and took with him the sacred Ark of the Covenant. Menelik then returned to Sheba (modern-day Ethiopia) to establish the first Jewish kingdom in Africa. Christian Ethiopians believe the Solomon and Sheba story is the true one, but our holy men believe we are descended from the tribe of Dan.

HISTORY OF JEWS IN ETHIOPIA: FROM POWER TO POWERLESSNESS

#3

Our elders told us that Jews have lived in Ethiopia for thousands of years. They told us that the Beta Israel community was prosperous for many centuries with a population of over 500,000. We were powerful, then, with wise leaders and fierce warriors and from the 6th century BCE to the 4th century CE Jews ruled large parts of the country. The decline and final defeat of the Beta Israel's dominance of Ethiopia began about the 4th century, CE, when Christian missionaries began to convert Ethiopians to Christianity. In the 13th century, CE, the Solomonic (Christian) dynasty controlled the country and became powerful using unsubstantiated claims of their legitimacy as direct descendants of King Menelik, the son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. For the next 300 years, until 1622 CE, intermittent battles between the Christians and the Jews erupted throughout the country. In 1624, the Beta Israel, led by Princess Judith, finally lost its battle for independence against the Ethiopians.

A survivor of that fierce battle left a vivid account of what happened to our people. From generation to generation, the story is told by parents to their children. This is what my mother told me: "Beta Israel men and women fought to the death from the steep heights of their fortress. They did not want to be taken alive and become slaves, so they threw themselves over the cliff or cut each other's throats rather than be taken prisoner. The Ethiopian Christians burned our written history and our religious books. They wanted to destroy forever our memory of Judaism in Ethiopia." Yet, despite our sad history, Judaism did survive among the country's Beta-Israel, and even today, many traces of Jewish influence can be seen in the everyday life of Ethiopians.

THE FALASHAS: DISCRIMINATION AGAINST ETHIOPIAN JEWS

#4

The decline of our power introduced a new era for us in our own country. We were often sold as slaves and many of us were forced to convert to Christianity in order to survive. As a result, the majority of Ethiopian Jews lived in great poverty. For over three centuries Jews were treated differently from other Ethiopian Jews. They were called, Falashas by other Ethiopians. That is the Amharic word, for "outsiders". Until the 1970s, Falashas could not be citizens of Christian Ethiopia. There were only a few ways that Falashas were allowed to work in Ethiopia. My father was a farmer, but he could not own land; he could only work as a tenant farmer and had to pay taxes to farm. We were the poorest of the poor. It was more difficult for us to survive in times of our country's frequent famines. Ethiopian families were large. My mother stayed home to raise me and my five brothers and sisters. She was an artisan and made beautiful things, but Beta Israel

women were only allowed to make small statues out of clay, pottery, and baskets out of reeds. We sold them to make a little money for our families.

It is strange that Ethiopians needed the things Jewish artisans made, but they looked down upon us as mere crafts people. They thought that making such crafts was a lowly occupation. My uncle was a skillful blacksmith. He made fine knives and tools out of iron. Ethiopians in remote areas of the country do not have the technology to produce such tools. Yet, the Beta Israel community was feared by Ethiopians because our smithies worked so well with fire to create the tools Ethiopians needed. Their fear was based on Ethiopian superstitions. They thought our smithies' skillful handling of fire meant that we were people of magical cunning. Our neighbors viewed us as budas, the mythical hyenas who turn from human to animal form at night. They thought the Beta Israel were possessed of the evil eye and were allied with the devil. In our everyday life, Ethiopians, generally, kept a distance from Jews. We were isolated from other Ethiopians. We were viewed as a separate community of people in Ethiopia - a people they called the Falashas.

CULTURAL SIMILARITIES SHARED BY BETA ISRAEL AND OTHER ETHIOPIANS

#5

Yet, Ethiopian Jews were like other Ethiopians in many ways. The Beta-Israel's homes were just like those of other Ethiopian villagers: round, 20-foot pole and mud structures with grass-thatched roofs, called tukuls. We all look essentially the same and are recognizable as Ethiopians. We all wore the same type of clothing, called a shamma, for which men wove white cotton material. We all spoke our national language, Amharic.

We also ate typical Ethiopian food such as injera which is a large spongy pancake that is made from the grain tef which is delicious and a very healthy food. We grew tef in our fields and ate injera with wot, a spicy stew of grains and vegetables or chicken and eggs.

Like other Ethiopians, our married women did not take the name of their husband; they took the first name of their father as their second name. Like other Ethiopians our families were large and extended, but all members kept in close contact. We were just like other Ethiopians in our respect for our elders. We never contradicted our elders--not even our older brothers and sisters. In so many ways we continue to be like other Ethiopians: we speak softly; we are hospitable within our community; we are extremely polite, dignified and in the past have shown great patience with our daily struggle to survive famine, poverty and discrimination.

JEWISH PRACTICES OF THE BETA ISRAEL AND OTHER ETHIOPIANS

#6

It's not surprising that Ethiopians and Ethiopian Jews shared many Jewish practices, since after many centuries of Jewish rule, some of our ways became part of the non-Jewish Ethiopians' way of life. Some of those practices still include the circumcision of all boys eight days after they are born. Pork is a forbidden food and milk and meat are never eaten in the same meal. We mourn

our dead in similar ways: for eight days after a death, people sit in mourning and neighbors and friends visit and comfort a grieving family. Ethiopian Christians observe a Saturday Sabbath as well as Sunday services. Our Kes told us that some Christian rituals, music and dance are like ours. So in all these ways, both Ethiopian Christian and Ethiopian Jewish culture and religion are alike.

THE SURVIVAL OF ETHIOPIAN JEWRY: SELF-IMPOSED ISOLATION AND COMMITMENT TO JUDAISM

#7

Yet, despite all the similarities between the Beta Israel and other Ethiopians, we remained a people, for the most part, separate from other Ethiopians. Our commitment to Judaism and our ancient religious traditions and practices also set us apart from Ethiopian gentiles. So while the Beta Israel were shunned by their neighbors because of superstition and religious prejudice, our own religious and traditional practices did not permit us to mix with gentiles. For the most part, we lived isolated and apart from our Christian neighbors. We obeyed the Bible's strict kashrut rules - ones that go back to pre-Talmudic Judaism of 2,500 years ago. The Beta Israel was able to survive as a community because we forbid the intermarriage between Christians and Jews.

Most important to us were the biblical rules of purity which we practiced so strictly that no Christian was allowed to enter our homes. We could not eat food prepared by gentiles. We even made special cups out of pottery for any neighbors who might have had reasons to visit us and we destroyed the cups afterwards.

Anyone who touched or was touched by a gentile was considered impure and was required to go through a purifying immersion before rejoining our community. Because of this, I did not go to the state run elementary school in our village or to our country's capital city, Addis Ababa, for a high school education. We provided for our own limited education within our community. So, I had almost no contact with non-Jewish children.

To keep us healthy, we relied on our own traditional Jewish doctors throughout the centuries and in the last century, Israeli doctors set up basic medical clinics in our villages. So we suffered from Ethiopian discrimination and superstition which separated us from our neighbors, while our deep commitment to Judaism isolated us from our neighbors so they could not get to know and accept us.

HOW THE WORLDWIDE JEWISH COMMUNITY LEARNED ABOUT THE EXISTENCE OF THE BETA ISRAEL COMMUNITY

#8

Outside of Ethiopia the existence of a Jewish community in Africa was not known until the early eighteenth century. when a Scottish explorer named James Bruce discovered us during his travels to find the source of the Nile River. But it took almost another hundred years

before the first European Jew, Professor Joseph Halevy was sent to find us. He spread the word to the wider Jewish community of our existence and spoke in support of our right to be recognized as Jews within the worldwide Jewish community. In the early nineteenth century, his follower, Jacques Faitlovitch committed his life to help us join the rest of the Jewish community. He took the first group of Ethiopian Jewish students to Europe and Israel in order to introduce them to modern Judaism. Upon their return, they became leaders of the Beta Israel and helped the Beta Israel learn about the world of Judaism outside of Ethiopia. Faitlovitch set up schools in Ethiopia which taught Hebrew and he renewed the hope that our dream of reaching Israel was a real possibility.

In my lifetime, I have learned about and experienced, part of the modern history of my people. Those events have helped us realize our dream of return to Jerusalem. In the late 19th century, Europeans came to Ethiopia, as explorers and as Jewish emissaries from Israel and Europe. After 2,500 years of being “lost” to the world of Judaism, we were “discovered” finally by Jews from the modern world. Imagine our amazement and wonder to meet white Jews! For two millennia, our people believed we were the only Jews to have survived the dispersion of our people in the Diaspora. For 2,500 years, we knew nothing about other Jewish communities all over the world.

JEWISH PRACTICES OF THE BETA ISRAEL AND JEWS AROUND THE WORLD: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCE

It was a revelation to our Kessim that Jews outside of Ethiopia govern their lives based on Talmudic law while we practiced pre-Talmudic Judaism since the time of the Diaspora, 2,500 years ago. Moreover, our elders have learned that our ancient observances are similar in many ways to the traditions and religious practices of today’s Jewish communities around the world.

Our spiritual leaders are called Kessim, or what other Jews call rabbis. Kessim are highly respected. They led us in religious observances that go back to pre-Talmudic Judaism before the fall of the First Temple in 586 BCE. Our Torah, which is called Orit, is not written on a scroll nor is it written in Hebrew. It is written on sheepskin parchment leaves bound in a book and written in an ancient Semitic language called “Ge’ez” which our Kessim can read. Kashrut has been kept strictly according to biblical rules and we observed many fasts and strict Shabbat (sanbat) and Jewish festival requirements.

It is amazing that although we had been separated from the worldwide Jewish community for hundreds of years, we celebrated many of the same holidays that other Jewish communities do around the world. The Commemoration of Abraham, interpreted as “the day God created the world”, corresponded to Rosh Hashanah. Astasreyo was a penitential fast held on the same day as Yom Kippur. Ba’ala masallat was the Feast of Tabernacles, or Succot. Soma Aster (The Fast of Esther) commemorated “salvation from Haman by Esther”. Fasika corresponded to Passover and we broke all our used items before the festival. For Fasika, we made new pottery, utensils, clothing, bedding and ate unleavened bread. Seven weeks later we celebrated Ma’arir, the harvest festival

of Shavuot. We purified ourselves for it and said the ‘receiving of the Torah’ prayer.

We fasted in the month of Tammuz that resembles the Jewish observance of the seventeenth of Tammuz called Soma Tomos. We observed the Fast of Av called Soma Ab and, like other Jews, mourned the destruction of the First Temple. In addition, we mourned our own exile, so our period of mourning was longer than other similar Jewish observances. We also observed the Festival of the New Moon on the first day of each month.

Everyone in the Beta Israel community observed Sabbath prayers in the sturdiest building in the community, our synagogue, which we called our mesgid. There was a Star of David above the entrance of the mesgid. In the past the Beta Israel practiced Pascal sacrifice, but they do not do so anymore. In our daily lives we were governed by our religious commitment to family purity. The Beta Israel were known as the “clean Ethiopians” who “smell of water”. Jewish Ethiopians always lived near lakes because we practiced cleanliness and purity in mikvah immersions and had separate menstrual huts. Like Jews around the world, we washed and said a blessing before eating.

We had a strong oral tradition about Judaism which helped us to preserve our Jewish history and made up the content of Beta Israel religious life. Our Judaic practices and ceremonies enabled us to retain our Jewish identity throughout centuries of oppression and hardship.

#9

Unlike Jews around the world, in Ethiopia, we did not celebrate Chanukah which is a holiday unknown to us since it began in the late Talmudic period. Although we did not celebrate Purim as other Jews do, we held a Fast of Esther. We did not build booths for Succot, but spread fresh leaves on the floor of the prayerhouse. In Ethiopia, tukuls were our booths. Since we have been in Israel, we are now learning about the post-biblical Jewish observances of Shemini Atzeret, Simchat Torah, Chanukah, Purim, and the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. There is much to learn about changes in Judaism since we were separated from all other Jews so many hundreds of centuries ago.

SIGD: AN ANCIENT JEWISH HOLIDAY PRACTICED ONLY BY THE BETA ISRAEL

Israelis are learning from us too. The Beta Israel celebrate an ancient Jewish holiday that is unique. It is not known to Jews around the world. It is called Sigd. It has not been known to other Jews since the Babylonian Exile in 586 BCE. We celebrate Sigd two months after Rosh Hashanah.

In Ethiopia, we fasted for half a day, read from sacred texts and climbed a mountain to face Jerusalem and prayed to be allowed to return to the Holy City, Jerusalem. After our prayers, we held a great feast. Now, each year, we celebrate Sigd in Israel. It had been our dream for centuries to make our aliyah. As Ethiopian-Israelis, we will continue to celebrate Sigd, a holiday that helped to sustain our hope for over 2,000 years, for our return to Israel.

**THE BETA ISRAEL EXODUS FROM ETHIOPIA: ISRAEL'S RESCUE MISSIONS:
OPERATION MOSES (1984/85) AND OPERATION SOLOMON (1991)**

10

By the 1950s, some Ethiopian Jews managed to emigrate from Ethiopia to Israel. But, conditions for our people worsened by the 1980s. There were terrible famines, the rapid spread of disease and increased pressure to stop practicing our religion under the dictatorial, communist, regime of Colonel Marian Mengistu. To save us, two huge rescue missions were mounted by Israel with the help of American Jews and international Jewish organizations. In 1984 Operation Moses (the one that saved me and my family), 8,000 of us were saved and 14,000 in 1991 Operation Solomon. For us, finally arriving in Israel was like a miracle. For centuries, in Ethiopia, we were denied citizenship. We were outsiders with no rights in our own country. Upon landing, we immediately became citizens of Israel! We had finally returned.

LEFT BEHIND: THE FALASH-MURA

As of 2006, there were over 110,000 Ethiopian-Israelis in villages and cities throughout Israel. However, about 20,000 Ethiopian Jews, Falash-Mura, were left behind during Operation Solomon.

Falash-Mura family members were not allowed to leave Ethiopia and enter Israel with their Beta Israel relatives. The Falash-Mura are Jews whose ancestors, their immediate relatives or themselves, converted to Christianity, usually under pressure. When given the chance, most have returned to Judaism.

The Beta Israel families left behind in 1991 have been separated from their parents, children or brothers and sisters since then. They long to rejoin their families and make their aliyah. Over the years since Operation Solomon, many of them were able to immigrate to Israel. In 2006, the last remnant of about 9,000 Ethiopian Jews, who qualify for immigration under Israel's Law of Return, still wait.

Since the 1980s, the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (NACOEJ) has been an advocate for their return. It has worked with the Israeli government and Jewish agencies to help these remaining Ethiopian Jews survive appalling poverty, starvation, disease and discrimination in Ethiopia and to help prepare them for life in Israel. Being a new immigrant group in any country is a challenge. It is not easy to change from our life in remote agricultural communities in Ethiopia, with no electricity or running water in our tukels, to life in Israel's modern technological society. NACOEJ, the American Jewish community and the Israeli government are committed to continuing to help us meet the educational and other challenges we face in Israel as we adjust to our life as members of the worldwide Jewish community.

*This fictional narrative is based on historical, cultural, religious practices and traditional experiences of the Ethiopian Jewish community.