Long White Procession: Social Order and Liberation in a Religious Ritual

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Abstract: The Seged is a pilgrimage holiday celebrated by the Jews of Ethiopia on 29 November. Its purpose is to reconstruct a renewal of the covenant between the Jewish People and God in Jerusalem and at Sinai and to strengthen their religious belief. The research is based on a qualitative research method and uses interviews with religious priests and members of Ethiopian communities. The findings show that normative communitas was created during the Seged, which afforded expression for the solidarity of the Jewish community and strengthened their identity as a minority group in a multi-national culture. The hierarchic structure remained, and I did not find evidence for competition and conflict. The liminality in the Seged encouraged a different reality, of undermined routine, but also continuity of the social structure and control by the elite. The reflectance of the social structure also shows that contrary to the model presented by Victor Turner, the communitas created during the Seged was normative from the onset and did not develop over the course of the holiday.

1. Introduction: The Jewish Communities in Ethiopia

The Jews of Ethiopia called themselves "Beta Israel". They rejected the name "Falash Mura" given to them by their Christian neighbors, due to its derogatory meaning: foreign and inferior (Abbink 1990, p. 401; Teferi 2005). Most of them lived in small rural communities dispersed in northwestern Ethiopia, in Jewish villages or in separate areas in villages with a Christian population. They were composed of subgroups, defined according to their region of origin in Ethiopia: the majority from the Gondar region who spoke Amharic, and a minority group from the Tigray region who spoke Tigrayan.

Ethiopian Jews belonged to endogamous communities headed by the kessoch (kess—singular; kessoch—plural) or priestly clan who governed religion and custom, prayer forms, and reading from the Torah scroll (Orit) as translated into Ge'ez. The kessoch solemnized marriages, divorces and burial ceremonies (Shabtay and Kacen 2005).

The Ethiopian Jews were very strict in adhering to the laws of Jewish slaughter (shechita), eating and menstruation (Shalom 2012, pp. 249–57, 293). Strictness in upholding purity was intended to strengthen the identity of the Ethiopian Jews as a minority group within a multi-ethnic society. During the menstrual period and after giving birth, the women stayed in a special hut (margam jojo) on the edge of each Jewish village. The hut was surrounded by a stone wall that marked the impure space, and women of the impure woman's family left her food there, lest they come into contact with her. At the end of menstruation, the woman immersed in the river and laundered her clothes (Cicurel and Sharaby 2007).

The village consisted of groups of huts (tokuls) within fenced lots, where members of the extended patriarchal family lived in each lot, up to four generations. The kinship group was a solidary unit with immense importance to the individual (Salamon 2008, p. 122). A central concept in family and community life was honor, where a hierarchy existed according to the main parameters of age, gender,

religious and economic status and role (Bodovsky et al. 1989, pp. 10–13; Poluda 2007). The family structure was patriarchal, and the woman's roles were related to domestic activity and the children's education (Weil 2004).

The Jews of Ethiopia were cut off from the rest of the Jewish people since the destruction of the First Temple. They were not influenced by historic events that accompanied Jewish halakha over the generations. Their tradition was based on the written Torah given to Moses at the Revelation at Sinai, and their customs are not compatible with the customary halakha of the rabbinic Jewish-religious world (Shalom 2012, pp. 59–60).

Studies show that they were persecuted and suffered many hardships from the 14th to the 20th centuries due to their desire to preserve their religious faith and the differences between them and their Christian neighbors (Abbink 1990, pp. 401–2; Teferi 2005, p. 180). The tradition of the Ethiopian Jews included special customs and holidays not celebrated in other Jewish communities around the world. The most important of these was the Seged, the annual pilgrimage holiday, which Jews who live in Ethiopia still celebrate today, and which is the subject of this article.

2. Materials and Methods

I used the phenomenological-hermeneutical method for achieving the research goals. This method attributes importance to understanding, describing and analyzing a social phenomenon (in this case, the pilgrimage during the Seged holiday), via the participants' subjective experience (Chase 2005). The phenomenological-hermeneutical approach claims that there is a difference in people's definition of reality. It is important that the researcher clarify their points of view and perceptions regarding the meaning of the studied phenomenon (Van Mannen 2011).

The hermeneutical approach is particularly essential for analyzing the complex meaning of a ritual, like the one performed during the Seged, since the ritual is a dramatic pattern that may contain both conflictual and integrative processes. Careful interpretation of past insights into the roles, the embedded rules and the hidden meanings of the ritual is important. According to Geertz (1990, p. 30), in analyzing a text, the researcher examines the society as a text whose many levels he interprets: the level of people's internal interpretation (emic concept) and the level of the observing researcher's interpretation (etic concept).

The research tool suitable for achieving this goal is a semi-structured in-depth interview that may supply information and focused reference to the issue chosen by the researcher (Shkedi 2003, p. 23). The researcher also gives the interviewee an opportunity to express himself and develop topics in directions that the researcher did not foresee.

The semi-structured in-depth interviews in this study afforded me knowledge and insights on the unique phenomenon of the Seged pilgrimage in Ethiopia. In total, 40 interviews were held, intermittently, between 2012 and 2017. Diverse demographic data were chosen in order to avoid research bias. The interviewees included 18 women and 22 men—of whom, 10 are old religious priests (kessoch) who led their communities in Ethiopia and young kessoch who received their training in Ethiopia and were appointed to their position in Israel. I met these leaders within the framework of a journey of interviews I made with a colleague in settlements of Ethiopian immigrants in Israel. Most of the interviewees live in these settlements, mainly in periphery areas. The interviews were held in synagogues or in the interviewees' homes, and when necessary younger family members helped in translation.

The interviewees' ages ranged from 38 to 83. Some immigrated from Ethiopia to Israel during the first mass immigration wave in 1984, and some in the second wave in 1991. They came from different communities in Ethiopia and experienced the Seged as children or as adults. I noticed the advantage of the older research population, and in particular the kessoch, as an important source that can contribute to understanding the unique elements of the Seged as a community holiday in Ethiopia.

During the interviews, I first asked the interviewees general questions, such as their first and last name, their age, year of immigration to Israel, place of residence in Ethiopia and in Israel, occupation

and family status. I then asked questions referring to their memories and experiences of the holiday in Ethiopia, such as: What does the Seged holiday mean for you? What is its significance for you? What preparations took place in your place of birth within the framework of the family and the community? Were there defined roles for men, women, children, and what was your role in these preparations? Why did you celebrate on the mountain and not in the synagogue? What role did the kessoch fulfill in the holiday? Who went up the mountain? What did you wear? Was there gender separation on the way up the mountain and on the mountain? Describe the ritual on the mountain. What did you ask for in your prayers? How did you feel after descending from the mountain? Tell me about the community meal at the end of the fast.

The material was analyzed as customary in a qualitative method based on interviews as the research instrument: transcription of the interviews, coding of the transcription into topics, creating categories and identifying units of meaning—themes. The significant advantage of this technique is that it enables analyzing the interviews according to categories of meaning that arise out of the analysis of the interviews, and not according to predetermined categories (Green et al. 2007; Shkedi 2011).

Use of a method that reconstructs culture through interviews, and particularly of older people, has limitations that are characteristic of life stories in general (Atzmon 2001, p. 137; Dudai and Edelson 2016). There is a tendency, at older ages, to forgetfulness and idealization of the past. Nonetheless, these sources, which comprise an "oral history", are an important social and cultural text, as in the studied phenomenon, where written sources are scarce.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Leaving the Structure during the Pilgrimage

The anthropologist Victor Turner accepted Van Gennep's three-dimensional ritual model, particularly the liminal period. In Turner's view, pilgrimage is a universal religious practice with three rites of passage: separation from the community of origin to enter sacred space; abiding in an otherworldly liminal existence; returning home to reunite with society (Turner and Turner 1978).

Turner was influenced by Eliade's (1958, pp. 370–71) idea of a sacred space but did not accept the emphasis on the center in Eliade's theory (Eliade 1959, p. 21; Eliade and Sullivan 1987, p. 166). Turner claimed that a pilgrim leaves his home and his familiar world and goes on a dangerous journey to "a center out there", which becomes a temporary center for him during this time (Turner 1973; Turner and Turner 1978, pp. 34–35).

Turner identified transformations similar to rites of initiation and endurance discussed by Van Gennep (1960). Turner claimed that similarly to those undergoing these rites, the movement of the pilgrim from the secular center to a sacred frontier enables him to distance himself from everyday life, to a place where he can mortify himself, atone for his sins, be liberated from distress and gradually return at a higher spiritual level (Turner and Turner 1978, pp. 33–35).

According to Turner, pilgrimage as a liminal phenomenon exists on the margins of geographical and social frameworks, and their laws do not apply to it. Places of pilgrimage in different religions are usually found outside the administrative center of the state or church (Turner 1975; 2005, pp. 38–41). Pilgrimage is leaving the customary social structure on which society bases its everyday life, for an anti-structure that expresses an undermining of normative rules (Turner and Turner 1978, p. 9). The created anti-structure is complex. On the one hand, it has defined rules and a fixed order of events. On the other hand, it contains a subjective aspect with charismatic, sacred traits (Turner 1979, pp. 97–98).

In Turner's opinion, the liminality which encourages anti-structure creates a different reality that liberates the person from social bonds and enables him to achieve a different level of understanding (Turner 1979, p. 41). The pilgrim experiences "a moment that is outside of time" at the pilgrimage site, which exposes an encompassing social bond (Turner 1969, p. 96; Turner and Turner 1978, pp. 34–35). This is the communitas characterizing liminal situations, according to Turner. Communitas is a state of the community where the participants express strong feelings of humanity, spontaneity,

fraternity, shared fate, mutual responsibility and equality, that abolish everyday class differences. According to Turner, this is a model of reciprocal relations, without which society cannot exist. Due to the collective experience, the social system gains a renewed spirit (Doron 2006, pp. 30–31; Turner 2012; Turner 1969, pp. 131–32).

According to Turner, pilgrimage cultivates the growth of an existential or spontaneous communitas, which turns into a more organized social system, i.e., into normative communitas. He claimed that normative communitas is the characteristic form of social communication among pilgrims and between pilgrims and those who offer them help and hospitality on their sacred journey (Turner 1975; 2005, p. 22).

Researchers who relied on fieldwork in different religions adopted Turner's approach and regarded pilgrimage as a religious and social phenomenon that includes walking and praying accompanied by feelings of fraternity with fellow pilgrims (Limor 2014, pp. 33–39). The excitement that accompanies the pilgrimage and the pilgrims' sense of liberation from everyday norms often also invites licentiousness (Frankel 2011, p. 146).

3.2. Heterogeneity and Competition in Pilgrimage

Turner's model, according to which the shared and anti-structure experiences are universal characteristics of pilgrimage, is based on a model that allegedly clarifies the phenomenon in many cultures. This model aroused theoretical criticism, voiced mainly by the anthropologists Michael Sallnow and John Eade, who contributed to the creation of a new and pluralistic agenda in pilgrimage studies (Eade and Sallnow 1991a). They presented field studies intended to prove that some of the characteristics attributed to the concept communitas do indeed occur sometimes. However, they concluded that the social boundaries and differences are not weakened under such conditions, but rather remain, and in many cases even strengthen (Eade and Sallnow 2005, p. 68; Morinis 1984; Sallnow 1981, 1987). Turner's assumption of an essential connection between pilgrimage and anti-structure does not only ignore the complex nature of the phenomenon, but also forces an imagined homogeneity on pilgrimages taking place under different historical and cultural circumstances (Eade and Sallnow 2005, p. 69).

According to Eade and Sallnow, both the positivism of the functionalist approach and the dialectic pretenses of Turner's approach rely on the same structural elements and view pilgrimage as supporting the existing social order or as subversive. Sallnow and Eade claimed that we must free ourselves of this simplistic dichotomy and examine this phenomenon not as the opposite of structure, but rather as a field where a competing dialogue takes place (Eade and Sallnow 1991b, pp. 1–6; Eade and Sallnow 2005; Feldman 2005, p. 9).

Eade and Sallnow wrote that contrary to the pilgrimage related to the ritual of the Virgin Mary, on which Turner based his viewpoints, Christian journeys to other places, such as Jerusalem, Sri Lanka and Peru, are characterized by expressions of animosity and labeling of boundaries between groups (Eade and Sallnow 2005, pp. 65–67, 75; Sallnow 1981; Stirrat 1991). In their opinion, pilgrimage stresses the heterogeneity of the process due to being an arena of competition between a religious and secular discourse; conflict between religious beliefs, sects and factions; aspiration to consensus and communitas; and in parallel also to movements that strive to division and seclusion.

In the above-reviewed literature review of pilgrimage studies among different religions, the ritual sites are characterized by an anti-structure and communitas, or by structure and conflict. The present article discusses pilgrimage among the Ethiopian Jews during the Seged holiday and investigates a phenomenon that has not been illuminated in research to date, of a unique social hybrid situation that simultaneously includes structure and anti-structure. The point of view and the impressions of participants in the Seged procession and ritual served as an important measure for investigating the social process that took place among the pilgrims during their journey, upon reaching the target area, and during the return journey. It will help us conclude the extent to which the ritual process in the Seged developed communitas relations.

4. Results

4.1. Response to a Religious and Social Crisis

Seged (in Amharic) means to bow. The holiday is also called Mehläla, which means supplication (Abbink 1983, p. 791). The Seged is celebrated on 29 November, i.e., 50 days after Yom Kippur, which is a day of private self-scrutiny in Judaism. Setting the date for the Seged had special significance, which indicates its conceptual affinity to Yom Kippur. The basic assumption is that in order to be worthy of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, it is not enough to fast on Yom Kippur, i.e., to undergo correction on the personal level. Rather, a count of fifty days of repentance should be maintained. On the fiftieth day, the experience of Yom Kippur should be re-experienced, only this time as a collective that underwent a corrective experience and an increase in ethical, personal and social tension (Shalom 2012, p. 209). Kess Wabshit Einbram said, for instance: "We celebrate 50 days after Yom Kippur in order to remember Yom Kippur, in order to remember the repentance and the promise that each one made on this day. Each person must again perform self-scrutiny".

In the tradition of the Ethiopian Jews, it is claimed that the origin for the holiday is of the Jews' pilgrimage during the "Return to Zion" period headed by their leaders Ezra and Nehemiah. During this period, the Jews returned from an exile in Babylon in 538 BC, following the declaration of Cyrus king of Persia. The Ethiopian Jews explain the existence of the Seged as an event of renewing the covenant between God and the People of Israel during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, who gathered the people, read the Torah to them, and the people repented (Shalom 2012, p. 209).

There exists evidence for the celebration of the Seged in the 15th century. However, in the absence of a written tradition, it is difficult to determine when exactly its celebration began. It is assumed that the holiday was set as a response to religious and existential crises in the history of Beta Israel, which endangered their physical and spiritual existence, i.e., intermarriages and conversions. Beta Israel therefore adopted the actions of Ezra and Nehemiah as an example, with the aim of strengthening their faith (Ben-Dor 1985a, pp. 67–72).

A historic perception, that indicates a continuity of the tradition of Ezra and Nehemiah by the Jews of Ethiopia, and its important role in preserving their religious identity, was voiced in conversations with their spiritual leaders. The interviews raised additional religious and social meanings of the Seged holiday. The holiday reminds them of the covenant between God and the people of Israel during the Revelation at Sinai. The Seged serves as an opportunity for reminding the Beta Israel of the need to be faithful to the commandments of the Torah and Jerusalem. Other interviewees stressed the social aspect of the Seged and its necessity for social solidarity.

4.2. Pure Space

Pilgrimage to sacred places is a known religious and social phenomenon among members of different religions (Maraval 2005; Turner 1979). It was also a major component in the lives and identities of different Jewish communities, mainly in North Africa (Bilu 2005). On fixed dates of the year, Beta Israel held pilgrimages to approximately ten sacred places (Ben-Dor 1985b) that were distant from their places of habitation and were sanctified due to miraculous or heroic acts of saints. They stayed in these places as individuals or communities for several days and engrossed themselves in spiritual activity. However, the perception of the place in the Seged holiday is a unique case.

Not all Ethiopian Jews made the pilgrimage to the sacred places on the Seged, which lasted only one day, to receive inspiration from the lives of the saints and imitate their deeds (Abbink 1983, p. 33). The Ethiopian Jews usually preferred pilgrimage to several mountains that were not inherently sacred.

Contrary to Turner, who claimed that pilgrimage exists on the margins of geographical and social frameworks (Turner and Turner 1978, pp. 25–34), the Ethiopian Jews preferred pilgrimage during the Seged to a place in the center. This custom is indeed compatible with the model presented by Eliade (1981), but contrary to this model, the place of pilgrimage in the Seged was not necessarily sacred. The mountains on which the Ethiopian Jews celebrated the Seged were not inhabited. It is

impossible to determine how many places served for these celebrations. From Ben-Dor (1985b) and the interviewees I gathered that there were approximately ten places (inherently sacred or not). The most prominent of these was the mountain near Ambober in the Gondar region, that served as a regional spiritual center.

As the Seged neared, the inhabitants of several villages left on a journey on foot to a large central village found near the pilgrimage site. The interviewees indicated that most of the Beta Israel went to a central village near their place of residence, a distance of a few hours on foot. Since the central village itself was near the mountain on which the religious ritual took place, the pilgrimage site can be referred to as the "near periphery". Those living in more secluded villages went on a long journey, that sometimes lasted several days. Upon arrival at the central village, they stayed with relatives or other local residents.

The uniqueness of the place of pilgrimage in the Seged is that it was located, symbolically, between marginality and center, and actually bridged between the theoretical perceptions formulated by Eliade—pilgrimage to a sacred center (Eliade 1981) and Turner—pilgrimage at the margins of geographical and social frameworks, so that the pilgrim will mortify himself and atone for his sins (Turner 1975, pp. 193–97; Turner and Turner 1978, pp. 25–34).

Pilgrimage to the mountain during the Seged was perceived by the Ethiopian Jews as important, because the mountain is a pure space, which may temporarily replace pilgrimage to Jerusalem during the time of the Temple. It was believed that the prayer of anyone found in a pure state and in a pure space will be heard. Pilgrimage to the mountain in Ethiopia was also perceived as an act reminiscent of Moses' ascension to Mount Sinai during the Revelation at Sinai (Abbink 1983, pp. 33–35).

The tradition of pilgrimage to a sacred space during the Seged was not always preserved in Ethiopia. When necessary, the holiday was transcribed to a new place, which is not necessarily sacred (Ben-Dor 1985a, p. 86). This phenomenon is familiar in the research literature and indicates the weight of different factors in shaping a pilgrimage tradition (Limor 2005, p. 256). A sacred space, whether its sanctity originates in heroic acts or miracles or whether by the religious ritual in the Seged, is perceived as less sacred than the sacred space in Jerusalem. The place for the Seged pilgrimage did not usually have immanent sanctity. Rather, it served as a means for pilgrimage to a sacred space in the Land of Israel.

4.3. The Ritual System

Every ritual is a planned event accompanied by the use of symbols, which Turner called central or dominant, since they are eternal and represent the cultural model (Turner and Turner 1978, p. 60, pp. 243–46). Turner also claimed that the influences of the symbolic objects are stronger during pilgrimage, where they are taken out of their routine framework into the new framework (Turner and Turner 1978, p. 11).

It is reasonable to assume that symbols which are familiar to the Jews of Ethiopia in everyday life, that were transcribed to the ritual system of the Seged, had greater influence on the commitment to the values represented by the symbols. The spiritual leaders of the community in everyday life were a central symbol in the ritual system of the Seged. The Seged, as a liminal phenomenon of pilgrimage, included major components that parallel the stages of a rite of passage, according to Turner's (1967) model, as I will describe below.

4.3.1. The Separation Stage—Preparations for the Holiday: "Walked on Foot for Several Days"

Walking to a place that is distant from everyday life, the tribulations of the way and the psychological distancing appear to be expressions that parallel the separation stage in Turner's theoretical model of rites of passage. This stage began with preparations for the Seged holiday. People from different villages went with their leaders, the kessoch, on a journey to the central village where the Seged was celebrated. The interviewees indicated the strong passion that caused them to leave their homes and villages, begin their journey and turn the pilgrimage into an experiential time

devoted entirely to the supreme cause. Marhat Malkam, from the village of Wuzaba in the Gondar region, said: "We came, members of the community, from far away, from different villages, to a high mountain, with lots of excitement. We walked for several days to reach the Seged holiday. We felt elation and sanctity".

The preparations in the hosting village were also accompanied by great excitement. The testimonies show that the hospitality, which was a main value in the culture of the Ethiopian Jews, fulfilled a major role in the preparations for the holiday. The preparations reflected the community and family solidarity (Salamon 2008, p. 122) as well as the traditional gender role division. Adiso Mamo said: "There were many preparations for the holiday. I would go to the market to buy new clothes for myself and for my family. We would also prepare for visits of the guests who came from afar, but each had his role: the wife mainly at home cleaning, cooking. Everyone helped in preparing for the holiday".

The preparations for the Seged included purification, which the Ethiopian Jews were strict to observe (Shalom 2012, p. 210). All members of the community prepared and laundered their white holiday clothes, similar to the preparations made for the Revelation at Sinai. The act of purification created a symbolic connection to the Revelation at Sinai. I should indicate that sexual abstinence was also common in pilgrimages of other religions, as an act of purification (Maraval 2005, p. 161).

According to the testimonies, kessoch, together with other members of the community, went up the mountain a day or two prior to the holiday to ensure that the place was free of impurity. They reinforced the stone wall that surrounded their place of prayer and decorated it with colorful cloths. A small stone altar was erected in the front part of the wall, which delineated the place where the kessoch stood, for placing the Torah scroll. There were no additional special structures on the mountain.

On the day prior to the Seged, the kessoch slaughtered bulls donated by wealthy members of the community, according to Jewish dietary laws (shechita). The men prepared the meat for the shared meal at the end of the holiday (Shalom 2012, p. 210). The collective activity reflected the central place of the community and the value of mutual responsibility among the Ethiopian Jews.

4.3.2. The Kessoch at the Head of the Procession

On the morning of Seged, all members of the central village and their guests who arrived from other villages immersed in the river and dressed in white holiday clothes. They also fasted, similar to the acts of repentance of the people during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. I should indicate that fasting as an act of self-mortification and repentance also appeared in pilgrimages of other religions (Maraval 2005, p. 161).

A large gathering gathered in the synagogue square from the early morning hours. The kessoch took out the Torah scrolls singing, and the women made sounds of happiness. At approximately nine in the morning, a blowing of metal horns announced the ascension up the mountain and symbolized the beginning of the sacred holiday. The interviewees described the splendid sight of the climb up the mountain that took approximately one hour: a long and convoluted slow procession of people, singing, where the white dress can be seen from afar.

The order in which the community walked up the mountain reflected the social structure in everyday life in the community. The senior kess headed the procession, followed by the older kessoch wrapped in a dark velvet cloak (kabba) with a traditional white hat on their heads (shash). Next came the young kessoch and young men studying to become kessoch (debteras). These were followed by the kessoch's helpers (deacons) who carried the Torah scrolls on their head, wrapped in leather bags and colorful cloths, under a colorful umbrella that indicated the high rank of the kessoch. After them marched the elders of the community, then the men, and lastly the women and children.

Garmadai Nagosa said: "I remember that as a child, my father would force me to get up with him early in the morning. I would put on my new clothes and join the men, since I was already obligated to fast like the adults. We would climb a high mountain near our village in the Tigray region, with the kessoch leading. My mother and sisters climbed the mountain with the women, behind us".

Hundreds usually participated in the procession, while thousands participated in the procession that left the village of Ambober for the pilgrimage site. Since the Jews were concentrated in northwestern Ethiopia, this is also where the processions took place. According to the interviewees, all celebrators carried a stone on their back or head while climbing the mountain. The stone symbolized their submission to God on the day of the Seged, and their request of God to have mercy on them and fulfill their wishes.

When the celebrators reached the mountaintop, they placed the stone on the circular stone wall that indicated the "sacred space" that delineated the place of prayer of the kessoch, and where the Torah scroll (Orit) was placed (Abbink 1983, p. 793). The wall thus served as a physical and symbolic boundary that illustrates the representation, order and social control in the hands of the elite (see also Lefebvre 1991).

The stone was a main motif in the descriptions of the interviewees, and expressed the deep religious meaning attributed to the Seged as a day of repentance. Reuben Waba said: "I remember that we carried stones on our heads or on our backs. The stone symbolized a surrender to God. The significance of the stone on the head was that God is guarding and protecting us and we surrender to Him. On the mountaintop we placed the stones on the wall".

4.3.3. The Liminal Stage—The Ritual on the Mountain: "Praying and asking God's Mercy"

During the liminal stage, a public prayer was held on the mountain, which seemingly parallels Turner's second stage, of staying in a liminal space separated from everyday life. Analysis of the formal structure and the contents of a public ritual, such as the public prayer during the Seged, which I will describe below, enables testing the roles it fulfills for members of a religious community. It also comprises an opportunity to learn about the manner in which they present their interpretations of tradition via performance of religious practices (Libel 2004, p. 11).

On the mountain, the kessoch took up their place in the purified area and placed the Torah scrolls on the designated stone altar. Kess Sahalo explained that the order in which the kessoch stood in this area was important: the important kessoch stood in the first row, with the apprentice kessoch in the row behind them. The public also gathered around them according to a hierarchic order: the men and the adults in the front, behind them the young men, and the women around them, without any partitions.

According to the testimonies, the ritual on the mountain, which began at approximately ten o'clock, included prayers and begging for mercy, forgiveness and redemption from God, reading sections from the Torah and other texts. The priests prayed for hours. Each prayer was said in its unique melody, and the congregation answered with "Amen" and bowed from time to time. Similar to any ritual act, the Seged ritual was composed of several main units which I will present in brief, according to the following order (see also Abbink 1983, pp. 494–795; Ben-Dor 1985a, pp. 42–55).

1. The kessoch opened with the morning prayers of the Seged. Their main motifs were praise for God, asking for mercy and forgiveness and expression of yearning to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Temple.
2. Reading sections of the Torah describing the repentance of the people during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah.
3. Reading in the Torah about the Revelation at Sinai and reception of the Ten Commandments.
4. Reading chapters from the Torah that stressed the blessings for people who observe the commandments, and the curses for those who do not.
5. The priests held fixed prayers for the afternoon hours, whose content is praise of God and asking for forgiveness.
6. At approximately two in the afternoon, the senior kess gave a sermon to the congregation. He began with admonishments that they should uphold the commandments, love each other, and be loyal to the tradition of their forefathers. He warned them that they should walk in the path of God and fulfill his commandments so that he will bless them, and if they will not do so,

God will punish them. He then blessed the entire participating congregation and expressed the wish that just as they came to the Seged this year, so they will come to the Seged in Jerusalem next year, and the people answered "Amen". In these words, the Kess reinforced his messages of the holy day and expressed the yearnings of the celebrators.

The interviewees indicated the extent to which the contents of the prayers and their peak moments left a great impression on them and strengthened their faith. Malki Tamate, from the village of Wugamba in the Gondar region, recalled: "The entire community would listen to the prayer, prostrate themselves on the ground and ask for mercy from God. There was a feeling of purity, of sacredness, a feeling that the Gates of Heaven are opening and the prayer is accepted, and that next year we will indeed reach Jerusalem. After the prayer they said 'that we will not die before we see Jerusalem'". This interview, and others, reflects the social solidarity, which was attributed great importance by the Jewish community, as a minority group.

When the religious ceremony ended, at approximately three o'clock, the people would place sums of money on the stone wall that delineated the place where the kessoch stood. The money was payment for a vow that the praying person vowed, or a donation to the kessoch. The kessoch divided the money among themselves at the end of the day and used it for their communities.

4.3.4. The Reaggregation Stage: "We Descended the Mountain Singing and Dancing"

The journey back, the outburst of joy after descending from the mountain, and the meal, parallel the third stage of Turner's model, the stage of reaggregation of those participating in the ritual with society. When the kess finished his sermon, a metal horn was sounded, and this symbolized passage from the sacred to the profane and a turn in the holiday: the atmosphere of prayer, silence, seriousness and mourning was at once replaced with a sense of great happiness, relief and purification from sins. The kessoch and their helpers descended the mountain with the celebrators, singing, in the order in which they ascended. Kess Baruch Sandaka said: "The atmosphere on the mountain was sacred. We prayed that we would reach Jerusalem. Everyone listened very quietly, with respect, with veneration, even the small children. We descended the mountain singing and dancing and with a feeling of internal purification".

When they reached the village, the mass of celebrators walked around the synagogue with the Torah scrolls. Then they accompanied the return of the Torah scrolls to the Holy Ark in the synagogue while singing, blowing on horns and dancing. Putting the Torah scrolls back symbolized the end of fasting and the beginning of the festive shared holiday meal, that took place near the synagogue in the afternoon hours.

The interviewees indicated that the order in which the kessoch sat reflected cultural norms such as honor and hierarchy, and was determined by status, age and gender (Poluda 2007). The kessoch sat at the head of the table, according to the order of their status. The women served the traditional dishes, and the shared meal continued until nearly sunset, with singing, playing instruments and dancing. Zayat Tasama told of her experiences: "Near the synagogue we would cut the dabu (traditional thick bread), after making a blessing. There were many kinds of dips. All of us women would serve the men, and would also pour tela (an alcoholic beverage)". Jacob Aniyahu recalled: "We would descend the mountain after finishing the praying, bless the bread and hold a large meal. First the adults ate, and we waited patiently to be served as well. There was much respect for adults. This is how we were educated. Also, obedience to our parents".

The described ritual eating practices reflected the cultural values: respect, mutual help and hospitality. The eating culture during the Seged meal enabled exchange of information and strengthening of the mutual intra- and extra-community relations, similar to other social events in the community (Koiler 2014, p. 122).

The testimonies indicate that after the meal, most of the guests from the distant villages stayed overnight in the homes of the local families. The kessoch used this opportunity to discuss issues

common to their communities. Such acts of cooperation expressed the principle of mutual help and responsibility in the Jewish communities of Ethiopia (Abbink 1983, p. 795).

5. Discussion

The Seged is a pilgrimage holiday celebrated by the Jews of Ethiopia on 29 November. It is intended to reconstruct the renewed covenant between the Jewish People and God during the period of Ezra and Nehemiah in Jerusalem and at the Revelation at Sinai and to strengthen their religious beliefs and their yearning to reach Israel.

The interviews show that, similar to Turner's description, normative communitas was created during the Seged (see also Abbink 1983, p. 791; Ben-Dor 1985a, pp. 104, 116). It is expressed in all stages of the ritual system: in the journey to the central village; in the preparations, in the family gatherings; in cooperation between them; in gathering toward ascension of the mountain; in religious fervor during prayer and worship; in the sense of sharing and commitment to the community values; in the descent from the mountain; in accompaniment of the Torah scrolls back to the synagogue; in the festive meal; in the families enjoying themselves with their guests; in the meetings of the kessoch.

The religious ritual in the Seged strengthened general social aspects. Leaving the daily routine and going to a special place, and the sense of uniqueness of this day, deepened the feeling of fraternity between people who live far apart. The communitas in the Seged strengthened elements that define a community: sense of belonging, identification, as well as commitment to a distinct culture of shared values and norms, history and identity (Colclough and Sitaraman 2005; Etzioni 2000).

According to Cohen (1983), the place of boundaries in the definition of a community is central and even more important than the definition of its social structure. Jenkins (1996) claimed that marking community boundaries is a condition for the existence of a collective identity that includes an internal and external definition of the community. He stressed the importance of the need for members of the community to receive recognition as "different and distinct" from people who do not belong to the community. The collective identity of the community weaves a social network for its members that distinguishes between "them" and "us" (Gamson 1992; Melluci 1996).

I similarly conclude that the experience of sharing in the Seged did not only express the collective's solidarity, it also delineated and expanded the boundaries that marked the separation between the Ethiopian Jews and the "others". Studies show that they were persecuted and suffered greatly due to their steady belief and refusal to convert (Abbink 1990, pp. 401–2; Kaplan 1992, p. 87; Teferi 2005, p. 180).

The findings show that in spite of the fraternity of sharing in the Seged, the hierarchic structure remained (see also Ben-Dor 1985a, pp. 107–8). Actually, contrary to Sallnow's viewpoint (Eade and Sallnow 2005, pp. 65–67, 75; Sallnow 1981; Stirrat 1991), I did not find any evidence of competition, conflict or divides at the Seged holiday site.

I conclude that a unique hybrid social situation developed during the Seged pilgrimage, that simultaneously includes structure and anti-structure. The liminality during the pilgrimage of the Seged encouraged a different reality of undermining routine, but also continuity of the social structure and control by the elite. Turner presented a linear model according to which the spontaneous communitas created during a pilgrimage turns into a more organized social system, i.e., into normative communitas. It is created because the extreme sharing experience may threaten the social order, and the authorities of the religious or political establishment often try to restrict the sharing experience and channel them to normative patterns (Turner 1975; 2005, p. 22).

The reflection of the social structure during the Seged, as reflected in the findings, shows that contrary to Turner's theoretical model, in this case the normative communitas created during the Seged was normative from the onset. It seems to me that the explanation for this is the unique position of the religious priests (the kessoch), leaders of the Jewish community in Ethiopia, as a major symbol identified with the Seged as a holy religious holiday. They perceived themselves in everyday life, and during the Seged in particular, as being in charge of transmitting the forefathers' tradition from

generation to generation and as being responsible for the moral correction of the people so that they would be redeemed from their exile.

The kessoch, out of a sense of this heavy responsibility, utilized additional symbols (first and foremost the Torah scroll) in this ritual system, and conducted all stages of the ritual with the aim of transmitting the day's important messages: they prepared their communities for the Seged; headed the walk to the central village; personally supervised the purification on the mountain; ascended the mountain according to an internal hierarchical order; were positioned on the mountain top in a particularly sacred enclosure. The kessoch, as holders of the knowledge, who were the only one proficient in the Ge'ez language and the Torah, conducted the religious ritual, descended the mountain at the head of the celebrators' procession and played a major role in the holiday meal.

These and other activities, and especially the messages of the fundamental myth from the days of the Second Temple and the Revelation at Sinai that were transmitted by mediation of the kessoch leadership, imparted meaning to the Beta Israel community, constructed consensus around its basic values, enabled each individual to experience himself as part of the community and strengthened the status of its leaders.

After the immigration of the Jews of Ethiopia to Israel, in the immigration waves of the 1980s and 1990s, they celebrated in one central place in Jerusalem, to which they came via organized transportation. Abolishment of the traditional Seged procession to a great extent reduced the significance of the Seged as a pilgrimage holiday, and the community solidarity weakened. Furthermore, since the aspiration of the Ethiopian Jews to immigrate to Israel was realized, new perceptions and interpretations appeared regarding its relevance and nature in the new social context.

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