

THE FESTIVAL OF SIGD



Beta Israel

Until modern times, Ethiopian Jews, who are also called the Beta Israel, were not connected to other Jewish communities around the world. They were often isolated from their Christian and Muslim neighbours, and sometimes faced discrimination and oppression. The Beta Israel celebrated Sigd to unify their community during difficult times. For one day, everyone came together to remember their dream of someday returning to the holy city of Jerusalem.

In Ethiopia, the Beta Israel celebrated most Jewish holidays at home or in their village. Sigd was so important that it was a pilgrimage holiday, meaning that Beta Israel traveled from all over the region to celebrate it together as a community. They gathered in the Jewish village of Ambover, which was near the region's highest mountains. The night before Sigd, they said special prayers, they also prepared food to get ready for the special feast that takes place when Sigd's fast is over.



The Origin of the Holiday

“Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people– for he was above all the people and when he opened it, all the people stood up. And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered; “Amen Amen” with the lifting up of their hands; and they bowed their heads and fell down before the Lord with their faces to the ground.” (Nehemiah 8: 5–6)

Chapters 5–6 of Nehemiah describe a ceremony performed by Ezra and Nehemiah to renew the covenant between the people and God. On their return from the Babylonian exile, Ezra and Nehemiah found that the remnant of the community that had stayed in Jerusalem had strayed from the laws of the Torah. Ezra reads aloud from the Torah before all the people, to remind them what they've lost, and to recommit to observing the commandments.

What does Sigd mean?

The word "sigd" means worship, bowing, and it symbolises belief in God. The Festival of Sigd is celebrated 50 days after Yom Kippur, in which communal "soul reckoning" fasts are added to the personal one. The customs of the holiday are reminiscent of the status of receiving the Torah at Sinai and expresses longing for Zion and Jerusalem. The communal social significance of the holiday serves as an opportunity to strengthen the community unity – gathering, dialogue, connect between people, mutual assistance, reconciling and the opening of a new page in social relations while jointly deciding on the community's path to continue coping with current and long-term challenges.



Sigd in Ethiopia

Traditionally the community would gather in designated villages on the morning of Sigd and climb to a local high point or mountain. The climb is supposed to remind them of the climbing of Mount Sinai and they are led by their Kessim (spiritual leaders). The Kessim carry Torah scrolls, called Orit (much like the Hebrew "Ora" and the Aramaic "Oraita"), and the community follows them with rocks on their heads to symbolise their heavy sins. In the summit of the mountain, the leading Kess would offer prayers for redemption and a return to Jerusalem. The Kess will read selected passages from the Orit that speak of the observance of the commandments. Prayers would end with the wish to celebrate next year's Sigd in Jerusalem. After the prayer, the community descends from the mountain with singing, music and dancing and eat the holiday meal.



Today: Sigd in Israel

With the fulfillment of the dream of returning to Zion (Land of Israel) and the immigration of members of the community to Israel, the Sigd celebrations take place every year at a promontory overlooking Jerusalem (Armon Hantziv) or at the Western Wall. The members of the congregation gather, offer prayers for keeping the covenant with God, and read passages from the book of Nehemiah and the Book of Leviticus that deal with the covenantal renewal.

Over the years, the holiday took on a public tone, and many public figures attended the holiday ceremony. In 2008 the Knesset, the Israeli Parliament, enacted the "Sigd Holiday Law" – which established this holiday as an official holiday in the State of Israel. Celebrating the holiday as an official holiday serves as an opportunity to glorify the holiday and feel a little of the longing of Ethiopian Jews for Jerusalem and the Land of Israel, and to recognise the deep meaning of their immigration to Israel.

But more than that, the celebration of the holiday today allows Israel to stop and gather, out of mutual respect and partnership. The holiday is now an opportunity for the Jewish community as a whole to also consider how we want to repent as a collective and what actions we want to prioritise to creating a better society for all.

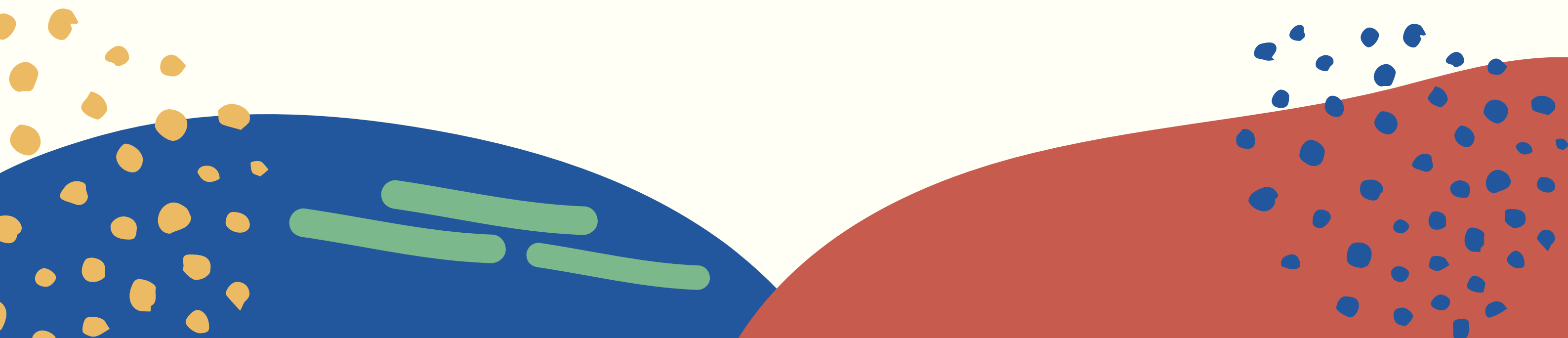


Aliyah Operations

In the 1980s, life for the Ethiopian Jews was extremely difficult, enduring terrible famines and the rapid spread of disease. They were also under increased pressure to stop practicing their religion under the dictatorial, communist regime of Colonel Marian Mengistu. Many Ethiopian Jews, therefore, began leaving their villages and making their way to Southern Sudan, where they hoped to make their way to Kenya, and then to Israel.

To try and help the Ethiopian Jews escape Ethiopia and to Israel. Israel set up rescue missions and the first mass rescue operations was called Operation Moses. Beginning on the 18th of November 1984 and ending 6 weeks later, they rescued just over 20,000 Jews who were brought to Israel. Many Jews were flown from Sudan to Europe, and from there to Israel.

The second Aliyah operation called Operation Solomon: At the end of May 1991, more 14,087 Ethiopian Jews were air-lifted to Israel. Another 4,000 who failed to reach the assembly centre in Addis Ababa in time, were flown in subsequent months.



Recipe Collection – Ethiopian Cuisine

Mesir Wat (Ethiopian Red Lentils)

Ingredients:

3 tablespoons vegetable oil
1 onion, diced,
1 head of garlic, minced
1 cup red lentils, rinsed and
picked over for stones
1 teaspoon chili powder
½ teaspoon sweet paprika
Salt, white pepper and black pepper
1–1½ cups water



Preparation:

Heat oil in a medium pot. When hot, add onion and garlic and sauté until golden brown. Add lentils, spices and water to the pot. Cover and cook 20 to 30 minutes, stirring occasionally, until lentils are tender, but not completely disintegrated. Serve with—or on—injera.

Mesir Wat (Ethiopian Red Lentils)

Ingredients:

2 tablespoons soybean or vegetable oil
2 large cloves garlic, crushed
1 onion, finely diced
Pinch each of black pepper,
white pepper, chili pepper, salt, ginger,
cumin
1 tomato, quartered
1 pound dried yellow split peas or dried green lentils
5–6 cups water



Preparation:

Heat oil in a large pot. When hot, add garlic and onion, stirring until golden and fragrant. Add spices and tomato and cook until combined and tomato is soft, about 15 minutes. Add peas and water to pot and simmer until peas are soft, but not mushy, about 45 minutes to 1 hour. It should be stew-like in consistency. Serve with—or on—the traditional flatbread, injera.

Recipe Collection – Ethiopian Cuisine

Injera

Ingredients:

7¾ cups teff flour

1 tablespoon yeast

4-5 cups water

Drizzle of oil, just to lightly coat pan



Preparation:

Stir together teff, yeast and water. It should be a runny liquid. Let it sit, covered, for at least 8 hours. (Some people let it rise for 2 to 3 days.) When ready to use, stir. The batter/dough should still be runny, like pancake batter. If it is hard, add a small amount of water and stir well. To cook, heat a large, flat frying pan, preferably nonstick. Wipe lightly with oil, just to coat. Pour a ladleful of batter into the hot pan, swirling to make it thin. Cook it until bubbles appear and burst, about 5 minutes. Remove from pan and stack one on top of another while preparing the others. To serve the injera, lay it on a large plate or tray and pile the accompanying stews on top or serve in bowls. Rip off pieces of injera and dip into the stews.

