

Hazkarah: A Symbolic Day for the Reconstituting of the Jewish-Ethiopian Community

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*This article analyzes the invention of the **Hazkarah** (memory), a new holiday of Ethiopian Jews in Israel that commemorates those Ethiopian Jews who perished while trying to reach Israel from Ethiopia before and during Operation Moses (1984-1985), and is held concurrently with the national holiday of Jerusalem Day. The process of establishing this day is considered in light of this community's current sense of marginalization in Israeli society. **Hazkarah** expresses the Ethiopian Jews' process of Israelization in contrast to their traditional holiday of **Segd**, celebrated in Ethiopia to mark the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai and reintroduced in Israel to express the community's re-Ethiopianization.*

A Quest for Commemoration

The Ethiopian *edah* (community) in Israel has sought national recognition for its *Hazkarah* (memory) day for mourning the four thousand Ethiopian Jews who died before and during Operation Moses (1984- 1985). This day contrasts with the celebration of *Segd*, a traditional ceremony held in Ethiopia that has changed its meaning and symbolic configuration in Israel.

Between 1977 and 1985, approximately twenty thousand Ethiopian Jews left their villages to come to Israel, but about one-fifth of them perished during the journey.² The difficulty of constructing a shared memory based on a founding event such as the exodus from Ethiopia, requiring a well-defined place for commemoration, has become a source of conflict within the *edah* itself and between the *edah* and Israeli society. Hence, this ceremony has become a metaphor for the *edah's* sense of marginalization in the society.

Contrasting Holidays

The Jews in Ethiopia had one significant day in their religious life, the *Segd*, a day that was specific to this community and commemorated the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. During the *Segd* the priests would carry the Torah up a mountain while the fasting

people followed them. The prayers were followed by a festive meal with songs and dances.

The first attempts in 1980 to introduce the *Segd* in Israel were marked by controversy over the choice of place. In 1982, however, the celebration was held on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, a successful solution. In Israel the *Segd* has been transformed into a day of celebrating Ethiopian identity, much like the *Mimuna*, the day of the Moroccan Jews' celebration of their identity.

The *Segd*, once a holiday that marked the Jewishness of Ethiopians in Ethiopia, became a holiday that marks the Ethiopianness of Jews in Israel. It continues to represent the ethnicizing of the *edah*, whereas *Hazkarah* is starting to become a new Israeli civil-religious holiday, in which a collective memory demands to be registered in the national narrative. This day, which is in the process of Israelization, currently has several names in Hebrew, and this uncertainty of terminology reflects an identity that is still confused or being defined.

Hazkarah was observed by Ethiopian Jews for the first time in Jerusalem in 1986, and over the years has been increasingly ritualized. The symbology that characterizes the time and space of the holiday is highly revealing. The chosen site is a spot near Kibbutz Ramat Rahel south of Jerusalem, and the chosen day is *Yom Yerushalaim* (Jerusalem Day), which falls on the 28th of the Jewish month of *Iyyar* (April-May). This date commemorates the taking of Jerusalem during the Six-Day War, as well as the soldiers who fell. Jerusalem- Zion was the destination of the Ethiopian Jews after abandoning Ethiopia. The choice of this day indicates a desire to identify with the Israelis who died in the fight for Jerusalem, and to affirm a sense of belonging to the same national narrative and memory.³ The place, Kibbutz Ramat Rahel, commemorates the site where, according to tradition, the biblical matriarch Rachel was buried. In this way the Ethiopian *edah* partakes in the genealogical memory of Israeli society and becomes less "foreign." A burial place of an ancestor of the Jewish people, and a kibbutz, symbol of Israeliness: these were excellent elements for symbolically constructing a new Ethiopian-Israeli identity.

The Observance of *Hazkarah*

As had already occurred during the founding of the *Segd* holiday, much controversy has arisen between Ethiopian Jews and the organizations that have represented them during the eighteen years of this holiday's existence. Criticisms were aimed at the crudeness of the site, which was poorly equipped, situated on steep terrain with little shade, and lacked a commemorative statue.⁴ This was always promised by politicians, but not provided. The community did not feel sufficiently honored or represented by this site. This provoked resentment and disagreements about urging the authorities to make the *Hazkarah* an officially recognized day. Most of all, the choice of place became a major source of conflict within the *edah*.

There was also disagreement over who should be commemorated. Some members of the *edah* thought the ceremony should mark not only those who died during Operation Moses but also those who died while waiting to leave for Israel during Operation Solomon in 1991. That is, they felt the day should commemorate all those Ethiopian Jews who died for the dream of reaching Zion, without distinguishing when and where they perished. This would mean a day of collective memory for all Ethiopian Jews.

The uncertainty about the site was resolved on 30 September 2003 when the Israeli High Court of Justice made a ruling on claims raised by different organizations.⁵ A compromise accepted by the parties to the case decreed that a statue would be built on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem. Meanwhile, while that monument was being erected, and in any case for another seven years, the previously chosen site of Ramat Rachel would continue to be used for the annual commemoration. Even after the statue on Mount Herzl was finished, those who wanted to continue regarding Ramat Rachel as a place of commemoration could do so. That decision⁶ put an end to the long controversy, and also indicated recognition of the need to institutionalize the event within the Israeli civil religion-as represented by Mount Herzl- without creating discontinuity with the previous symbolism. The decision, therefore, healed the rift within the Ethiopian community, which had been so symbolically invested in finding a site that the community's place within Israel itself had been at stake.

Ceremonial Practices:

"If You Put a Cat in a Corner, You Will Turn It into a Lion"

During the ceremonies for the *Hazkarah* on 9 May 2002, a group of young Ethiopians, mainly female, hung up large protest banners. The banners spoke of the role of the dead, but also raised the question of the *edah's* place in Israeli society. This was summarized with the saying: "If you put a cat in a corner, you will turn it into a lion," a phrase used by Palestinians to stress their condition and explain their transformation into militants. The young people's speeches during the ceremony also emphasized marginality, and some of the politicians were heckled and booed while making their speeches.

The ceremony began with the lighting of a torch and the display of a crown of flowers, while on one side of the clearing candles burned in a cave beside photos commemorating the dead. The event was closed by two young Ethiopians, a man and a woman who, he in Hebrew and she in Amharic, became the witnesses assuring the continued transmission of memory.

The ceremony symbolized the exodus and the destruction of part of the community in the name of Zion and Zionism, in a way that promoted the *edah's* integration into Israeli society.

The Transmission of Memory: Between *Hazkarah* and *Segd*

Since 2000, *Segd* and *Hazkarah* ceremonies have been conducted by Ethiopian Jewish students at Israel's Bar-Ilan University and made public to the rest of the student body. The *Hazkarah* ceremony takes place in a hall of the university and begins with the lighting of two torches (as for *Yom Hazikkaron*, the Israeli memorial day for fallen soldiers). Each Ethiopian student then lights a number of candles corresponding with the number of his or her relatives who died without reaching Zion. The construction of a new rite within the university, in which witnesses of Operation Moses were invited to recall the event before a student audience, acted as a substitute for a place of memory. From interviews with Ethiopian students at Bar-Ilan conducted by this author,⁷ it emerges that while the identity of this holiday is still murky, they would like it to become part of the Israeli narrative as a sort of "Shoah of the Jews from Ethiopia," as some of the students defined it.

For these students, going to *Segd* expressed a communal-familial sharing of identity, and was a way to meet with other Ethiopians from all over the country while introducing part of the Ethiopian past into the new Israeli context. Going to *Hazkarah*, however, was a step toward completing the Israelization process of the *edah*. Even the languages used indicate the difference: *Segd* has become the Amharic holiday, *Hazkarah* the Hebrew holiday. Many students emphasized that often they were not sure why they went to *Segd*, apart from the chance to meet others from the *edah*.

Going to *Hazkarah*, however, meant consciously engaging in one's own history and making it known to others, symbolizing the transmission both between Ethiopian generations and between Ethiopian Israelis and the rest of Israel.

At *Segd*, the students felt obligated to participate by social necessity but also marginalized because the whole ceremony was held in Amharic and in Ghez, the ancient religious language known only by priests-languages that for the most part they do not understand. For the elders, *Segd* was a day of prayer and memory connected to the Ethiopian past; for the young it was a day of communal socialization. Everyone, though, regarded *Segd* as a celebration of the Ethiopian community, much like the *Mimuna* for Moroccan Jewry.

Hazkarah has the nature of a typically Israeli commemoration that can be included among Israeli civil ceremonies. This holiday has been defined as "our *Yom Ha-Shoah*" (the Israeli Holocaust Day), as a day that encompasses everyone including those who did not lose family. *Hazkarah* has been less efficiently organized than *Segd*, with much of the information disseminated informally and often late (some see the ceremony on television only as it is ending). In addition, some of the students said that the uncertain issue of the location, a metaphor for the *edah*'s sense of disorientation in Israeli society, leads to nonparticipation or to the day becoming an occasion for protest.

The students complained that they had to wait eighteen years before the official decision was made to also allow Ethiopian Jews to remember their heroes, denouncing

this as an instance of discrimination against their community. The community has requested that its history become part of the national history, that the dead be remembered by all of Israel and not only on one day of the year, and that the legacy be transmitted to the new Israeli generation via schoolbooks.⁸ The interviewees also expressed a desire that the Ethiopian *aliyah* (immigration to Israel) and "Shoah" be integrated into the general history of the Jewish people. Their strong need to be fully recognized as part of Israeli society could be sensed in these statements. The students also showed that they shared the values of the society in regard to Jewish heroism, affirming that their own dead were heroes who had attempted to reach Zion.

The subject of the negation of the Diaspora, an essential element in Israeli identity construction, is starting to become controversial among the Ethiopian Jews as for the *Mizrahim* (Jews from Arab countries) before them. Both communities would like to have their own history, before coming to Israel, publicly recognized.

In conclusion, the Ethiopian *edah* is symbolically constructing itself through commemoration of the dead, in the same way in which Israel society has reinforced its own identity with two days of national commemoration, *Yom Ha-Shoah* and *Yom Ha-Zikkaron*. The Israeli Supreme Court's decision to officially institute a site for the *Hazkarah* holiday and associate it with the national Jerusalem Day has strengthened the *Hazkarah* as a means of symbolizing the reconstitution of the Ethiopian Jewish community.

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Notes

1. A longer version of this article was presented at the 20th Conference of the Association of Israel Studies, Jerusalem, June 2004, and is available on the website of AIS.
2. Most of them died of starvation or cholera in the refugee camps in Sudan. See Tudor Parfitt, *Operation Moses: The Story of the Exodus of the Falasha Jews from Ethiopia* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1985); Gadi Ben Ezer, "Trauma and Trauma Signals in the Narratives of the Migration Journey of Ethiopian Jews to Israel," in P. Thompson et al., eds., *Trauma and Memory* (London: Routledge, 1998).
3. "The Ethiopians feel that the heroic story of their arrival in Israel has not been sufficiently included in the pantheon of Zionism heroism, and that this omission from Israeli collective memory reflects their marginality in Israel society in general." Baruch Kimmerling, *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2001), p. 156.
4. The importance of the statue is also mentioned by A. Poskanzer, *Ethiopian Exodus: A Practice Journal* (Jerusalem: Gefen, 2000), p. 141.
5. In particular, one activist of the *edah*, Uri Rada, fought for many years for the monument to be constructed and formed an organization called Remembrance for Ethiopian Jews Who Died in Sudan on the Way to Zion. It was joined by other Ethiopian Jewish organizations concerned with human rights and the struggle against poverty as well as identity issues.
6. Reached in accordance with the Israeli government as represented by the minister and deputy minister of immigrant absorption, along with the education minister and Kibbutz Ramat Rahel.
7. Seventeen students were interviewed, seven men and nine women, along with a woman who worked in the university cafeteria. Two were key informants: a lawyer active in the organization that promoted the event and the *edah* activist Uri Rada (see note 5), who in addition to founding the "Remembrance" organization headed the initiative at the High Court of Justice. The students were aged 18-26, and none

were born in Israel. They were studying electrical engineering, biotechnology, criminology, sociology, anthropology, political science, economics, and Israeli literature and history. In 1999 there were 185 Ethiopian students with BA degrees at Bar-Ilan, out of a total of 553 in the whole country. The Ethiopians at Bar-Ilan were studying for their MA degrees.

8. An initiative to collect the names of those who perished during the journey to Israel (so far nearly a thousand have been recorded) was undertaken by different Ethiopian organizations.

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