Article

Contrasting Conceptions of Teshuvah: Between “Repentance” and “Atonement”—A Case Study of the Beta Israel Community (Ethiopian Jews)

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**Keywords: [**keyword 1; keyword 2; keyword 3 (List three to ten pertinent keywords specific to the article yet reasonably common within the subject discipline.)]

1. Introduction

The meeting of Israeli Jews and Jews from Ethiopia is not just a meeting between new immigrants and veteran Israelis. It is not just a meeting between blacks and whites. Rather, it is a meeting between two models of Judaism that are in some ways opposites—a more biblical Judaism and a more rabbinic Judaism. These two models of Judaism are meeting in the same geographic space: the State of Israel. With this background in mind, it is clear why members of the Ethiopian community, when they were just beginning to make *aliya* to Israel, found it difficult to understand why the Israeli Rabbis did not have perfect trust in the divine words that were said at Sinai and perhaps even before Sinai (and therefore did things differently from what is written in the Torah). On the other hand, some Ashkenazi Rabbis found it difficult to accept the Ethiopian Jews as full Jews.

The agonies of the absorption of Ethiopian Jews in Israel have seared themselves into their collective consciousness. When they arrived, they did not know its language, could not conceive of its pace of life, and did not understand its habits. They did not choose where they would live and did not find an education that would help them bridge their past with the state’s present and future. The Judaism for which they were martyred in Ethiopia was considered incomplete. It seemed that the land they had longed for questioned the legitimacy of their longings (Abbink 1984: 139–53; Shabtay 2000: 169–79; Shalom 2016: xxv; Sharaby and Kaplan 2014; Weil 1998–2001).

The Jews of the Beta Israel[[1]](#endnote-1) community faced an additional, unique challenge, unprecedented in Jewish history: On one hand, this community maintained its Jewish identity and devotedly upheld observance of the *mitzvot* for many generations, in the face of grave physical and spiritual difficulties and unrelenting attempts to get them to abandon their religion. On the other hand, their tradition of mitzvah observance diverges significantly from the rabbinic tradition that has been accepted by other Jewish communities, from the times of the Mishnah and Talmud, through the *Shulḥan Arukh* and its latter-day commentaries (Ullendorff 1988).

The commonly accepted view is that the Ethiopian tradition reflects an ancient *halakhah* whose connection to the Oral Torah familiar since the days of the early Rabbis is tenuous at best. Many of the Ethiopian Jews who immigrated to Israel from Ethiopia and grew up in Ashkenazic *yeshivot*, felt that the customs and practices they learned in their parents’ home formed a barrier between them and their peers. A significant part of the research dealt with the religious crisis of Ethiopian Jews in Israel. Often, observers viewed the religious world of Ethiopian Jewry through the lens of the rabbinic halakhah, particularly its Orthodox interpreters. It is time to move on to use the tools of theology and the study of religious practice to understand the Beta Israel community. We should understand the traditions of the community based on the perspective of its members, to try to understand how the Jews of Ethiopia understood the Jewish world (Abbink 1984; Shalom 2023).

This approach seeks to give voice to the Ethiopian Jews as they meet Israeli rabbinic culture, rather than to describe the community from the perspective of another culture. This approach will allow us to discuss the religious worldview of Ethiopian Jewry in traditional terms accepted by the community.

One example of the experience of difference which Ethiopian differences that always left them feeling deeply shaken was the difference between the idea of repentance familiar from the customs of Ethiopian Jewry and the idea of repentance familiar from the customs of the rabbinic tradition. They always sensed that there are significant differences between the atmosphere surrounding the days of penitence in Israel, where, as in the rabbinic tradition, they are called “Days of Awe,” and the atmosphere surrounding the days of penitence in Ethiopia, where they are called “Days of Joy.” As one young person reflected: “I don’t know why they call these days ‘Days of Awe.’ In what way was there awe? In Ethiopia these were the happiest days. We would even accompany the prayers with crumbs and instruments.” The Yom Kippur prayers in Ethiopia made their heart dance; the Yom Kippur prayers in Israel made their heart tremble. Another immigrant felt that the fear was deliberately instilled into them in Israel. “In Ethiopia, we were always happy on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, while here in Israel they injected us with fear.” In summary: “In Ethiopia, we would always look forward to these holidays. Here in Israel, I don’t look forward to the holidays.” Haplessly, these differences between the two traditions caused them to reflect that they were living their life torn between their oath to uphold their heritage, which would brand them as different, and their yearning to join the majority culture as an equal. What feelings should they manifest during these days? Reverence or love? Dread or joy? Should they emphasize “me” or “we”? And I wondered about the source of the differences between these two traditions.

1. Repentance (Teshuvah) Is Not Atonement (Kapparah), and Atonement Is Not Repentance

In this article, I will contrast the rabbinic and contemporary-Orthodox model of repentance with the biblical and Beta Israel paradigm of atonement, to help explain the distance that Ethiopian young people experience when the meet the yeshivas and synagogues in today’s Israel. It is worth noting that my interpretive starting point in this study is not from the accepted conceptual world of sociology, social anthropology, or even *halakhah*, but from a discursive realm that is closer to the discipline of Jewish thought. I will conclude the discussion by positioning the religious culture of Ethiopian Jews as a legitimate tradition within the evolution of the Oral Torah, unmediated by the Mishnah and the Talmud.

In this essay, I will contrast the repentance paradigm of the rabbinic tradition with the atonement paradigm of the Ethiopian tradition. In particular, I use the writings of Rabbis Joseph B. Soloveitchik and David Hartman to develop one of my central contentions, namely, that the rabbinic paradigm emphasizes the repentance of the individual, whereas the Beta Israel paradigm emphasizes the atonement of the collective. While these figures do not represent all of the rabbinic tradition—known, of course, for its spirit of animated dispute and polyphonic voices—they do articulate in a particularly bold and even extreme way the spirit of individual repentance that is present and animates the long-standing rabbinic approach to Yom Kippur. The distinction between repentance and atonement could explain for the disparity in atmosphere between the “Days of Awe” of the rabbinic tradition and the “Days of Joy” of the Ethiopian tradition. In this essay, therefore, I wish to raise the possibility that young Jewish Israelis from an Ethiopian background experience an encounter between two types of Judaism, two paradigms. On one side is Ethiopian Jewry, which is closer to the biblical model that grew out of an atonement-based consciousness, and on the other is the rabbinic tradition, closer to the Talmudic model and grew out of a repentance-based consciousness (Aescoly 1951).

1. Yom Kippur in Ethiopia: Between Collectivism and Individualism

For many of the emigrants of Ethiopian Jews who grew up in an Ethiopian village, where the holidays where enveloped in an atmosphere of joy, attending an Ashkenazic yeshivah, where the “Days of Awe” were filled with dread, was a dramatic even shocking change. Yom Kippur in Ethiopia filled the heart with calmness, serenity, and reverence, whereas in the Ashkenazic yeshivah, Yom Kippur filled the heart with fear and trembling before the terrible day of judgment. The fear reached its peak in the Ashkenazic yeshiva with the recitation of “*U-netaneh Tokef Kedushat Ha-yom*” (“Let us Describe the Power of the Sanctity of the Day”) on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. This liturgical composition describes panicked angels, and it illustrates how the verdicts of the day will determine, “who will live and who will die…who will experience tranquility and who will suffer.” It concludes by describing the insignificance of human beings, who “are made of dust and will return to dust.” This is not to say that such descriptions do not exist in the Ge’ez prayers of Ethiopian Jews; there are plenty of descriptions of human beings’ insignificance. Nevertheless, something feels different. What is it?

In the Beta Israel tradition, Yom Kippur is called “*Asteray*” (the Festival of Seeing) or “*Be’al Yosef*” (the Festival of Joseph), for on this day, Jacob received the news that his son, Joseph, had been killed by a wild beast. The basis for this is a tradition from the Book of Jubilees:

For this reason, it has been ordained regarding the Israelites that they should be distressed on the tenth of the seventh month—on the day when (the news) that made (him) lament Joseph reached his father Jacob—in order to make atonement for themselves on it with a kid—on the tenth of the seventh month, once a year—for their sins. For they had saddened their father’s (feelings of) affection for his son Joseph. This day has been ordained so that they may be saddened on it for their sins, all their transgressions, and all their errors; so that they may purify themselves on this day once a year. (Jubilees 34:18–19) [translations from VanderKam 2018]

Together the element of sadness reflected in this passage, Yom Kippur as described here is also as a day of celebration, happiness, and reunited family. The day upon which father and son, Jacob and Joseph, were reunited is cause for celebration. This includes atonement and forgiveness, as well as the removal of barriers that separate family. The day becomes one of hope and faith in God and His providence which begets happiness.

There is a somewhat different an oral tradition, which I heard from my grandfather, Abba Djan Mengesha, as well as from Kes Mentsnot, that the date of Yom Kippur was also the day when Jacob and Joseph were reunited after their long separation.

This day, indeed, has many different meanings.[[2]](#endnote-2) Yosi Ziv notes explains that *Asteray* refersto what was shown on that day, namely “the brothers showed Jacob the coat of his son Joseph, which had been immersed in blood. The harm to Joseph and the lie to Jacob are an eternal sin that must be atoned each year on Yom Kippur.” Ziv cites testimony from Kes Amhah Neghat that gives additional meaning to the festival of atonement: “The second Tablets of the Covenant that Moses brought down was on the day of Yom Kippur . . . For that reason, the day is called ‘*Asteray*,’ so that He shows us the Torah He gave us for a second time” (Ziv 2017: 139; Salamon 1999). Kes Mentsnot noted that Yom Kippur is a day of forgiveness that harbors rejoicing that God atones us and forgives us. There is no mention of a day of awe, as it is described in the rabbinic tradition. There is no fear and dread over the judgment of Yom Kippur, only joy and desire to arrive at this day, as Ziv describes in his book: “Yom Kippur. Everyone yearns to reach Yom Kippur. It is the greatest festival of the year. Sigd as well. These are the most prominent days” (2017: 139). And this is how Faitlovich describes, in 1904, the joyous atmosphere of this day:

The Yom Kippur prayers were recited with great feeling. Men, women, and children all displayed their building excitement. They sang from sunrise to sunset, and to my astonishment, they were cheerful songs. Occasionally they went out to perform beautiful dances. The men, young and old, danced together, as did the women and maidens. (1959: 84)

Still, on that day, everyone fasted. Even children were required to fast, starting at age seven. As Ethiopian sage Daniel Mengesha notes, when people approach Yom Kippur from within a collective, communal consciousness, the day takes on a different meaning. A person does not come alone to the courthouse but arrives with the entire community. The community, together, stands before the Holy One, the merciful God. Under these circumstances, the day is not ominous; it is not awful and terrible. On the contrary, it is joyful. The Ethiopian Yom Kippur thus has two opposing meanings: On one hand, it is a day of forgiveness and atonement, fasting, and deprivation, but on the other hand it is an exceedingly joyful day, a day whose arrival everyone awaited and anticipated. The experience was that the individual stands for the good of the community, and the community feels that it stands as a whole for the good of the individual. Spiritual accounting is on the communal level, not the individual level. Prayer is accompanied by special dancing, unique to Yom Kippur, which involved hopping from side to side as the prayers of the *kessim* are heard in the background. The following prayer is from the beginning of the Yom Kippur liturgy:

May the Lord, God of Israel be blessed . . . May the Lord, God of Adam and Seth be blessed. May the Lord, God of Noah and Shem be blessed. May the Lord, God of Abraham and Isaac be blessed. May the Lord, God of Jacob and Israel be blessed . . . May the Lord, God of the righteousness of Azariah be blessed. May the Lord, God of the word of Baruch and Abimelech be blessed. May the Lord, God of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah be blessed . . . May the Lord, God of Zion and Jerusalem be blessed. May the Lord, God of the priests and the prophets be blessed. [translation based on Aescoly 1973]

That is, among the prayers that comprise the Ethiopian Yom Kippur liturgy, many reinforce the idea of God’s actions—His kindness, His forgiveness, and His atonement. Collective consciousness, as still expressed in Ethiopian Jewish religious life, promotes a political–philosophical approach that emphasizes the sovereignty of the community, trains adherents to live without anxiety, concern about change, fear of commitment, or worries about difficulty working and earning a livelihood (Shalom 2023). The difference between collective consciousness and subjective consciousness does not find expression only in the psychological and social realms, but also in the theological realm and in halakhic decisions.

Either way, here we see the profound difference between the holiday atmosphere in Ethiopian Jewish religious culture and that of the atmosphere of these holidays in the rabbinic tradition. In the following paragraphs, I will claim that the root of the differences between the two traditions is rooted in the question of how the day is perceived: as a day of atonement or as a day of repentance.

1. From the Idea of Atonement in Scripture to the Emphasis on Repentance in Talmudic Literature

There is a central paradox in repentance, one articulated clearly by the medieval Jewish philosopher, R. Yosef Albo:

There is a great difficulty in connection with repentance as we explained it, as follows: Since the transgression has been carried out in deed, how can repentance, in the form of regret and confession, avail? If a man takes a life or profanes the Sabbath, does the life of the murdered person return to him, or does the profaned Sabbath become observed through confession and regret? It is like a person throwing down a house and then rebuilding it with his mouth. Words without deeds can not rebuild the house. How then can such repentance avail to wipe out and cleanse a sin actually committed? This is a matter that requires an explanation, viz. in what way repentance benefits the penitent. (1946: 4:26)

The Bible does not articular the paradox, but it does respond to it. As Sagi explains: “The Bible contains two paths to repair the past: the first focuses on the idea of repentance. The second requires an outside activity that will complete the active repair, or even execute it entirely. In the biblical literature, the outside act comes to fruition in atonement” (not yet published). The term “*teshuvah*” (repentance), Sagi explains, “does not appear as a noun in Scripture. As Ephraim Urbach noted, the term was coined by the Rabbis” (1969: 408).

Despite the close relationship between repentance and atonement, and despite the tendency of many to conflate repentance and atonement, they are, it seems, two distinct concepts. As Sagi explains:

Repentance is not atonement, and atonement is not repentance.Repentance is a human act. The individual initiates it and is responsible for it. Atonement is a metaphysical occurrence, beyond human capacity. A person cannot atone; it hinges on that which is beyond him. (Urbach 1969: 408)

In Scripture, repentance is a precondition for atonement, but the two are not identical. Repentance “does not bring about repair and change. Only atonement does . . . There is a need for atonement and forgiveness, beyond the act of repentance.” In fact, Sagi claims, whereas the principle of atonement, which is a metaphysical occurrence, out of human control, was developed in the biblical era, the principle of repentance became more central in the Talmudic tradition and post-Talmudic literature.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The distinction is particularly significant for Yom Kippur, which in the Bible focuses on atonement but has little to say about repentance. In Scripture and during Temple times, the priests would perform the atonement ceremony. The priests atone without any other action. In contrast, things changed after the destruction of the Temple. “Yom Kippur atones” (*M. Yoma* 8:8), but this atonement is conditioned on repentance (Auerbach 2001).

Note that the biblical verses about Yom Kippur emphasize atonement, and focus not on repentance but on the Temple rituals: So the priest shall make [[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=leviticus+4&version=NKJV" \l "fen-NKJV-2816b" \o "See footnote b)]atonement for them, and it shall be forgiven them (Leviticus 4:20); So the priest shall make [[e](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=leviticus+4&version=NKJV" \l "fen-NKJV-2822e" \o "See footnote e)]atonement for him concerning his sin, and it shall be forgiven him (Leviticus 4:26).

The Rabbis of the Talmud allude to this scriptural view and a change from Scripture to the thought of the Rabbis in a remarkable Midrash. The Midrash points to a series of biblical voices which leave no room for repentance. God Himself, not Scripture, focuses on repentance:

They asked the Torah: The sinner—what is his punishment? She said to them: He shall bring an offering and be atoned. They asked Prophecy: The sinner—what is his punishment? She said: “The person who sins—shall die” (Ezekiel 18:4). They asked David: The sinner—what is his punishment? He said: “May sinners disappear from the earth” (Psalms 104:35). They asked Wisdom: The sinner—what is his punishment? She said to them: “Misfortune pursues sinners” (Proverbs 13:21). They asked the Holy One, blessed be He: The sinner—what is his punishment? He said to them: He shall repent, and I will accept it. As it is written: “Good and upright is the Lord, [therefore he shows sinners the way] (Psalms 25:8).” (*Y. Makkot* 2:5)[[4]](#endnote-4)

The inclusion of the rabbinic notion of repentance above and beyond the biblical atonement appears also in the Talmud’s discussion of Yom Kippur, particularly in the contrast between the approach of the majority of the rabbis and that of R. Judah the Prince. According to other Rabbis, repentance is a precondition for the atonement of Yom Kippur (and specifically of the casting away of the scapegoat). According to Rabbi Judah, though, “For every transgression in the Torah, whether one repented or not, Yom Kippur atones” (*B. Yoma* 85b).

In general, Talmudic literature places paramount emphasis on the act of repentance not only in the context of Yom Kippur:

Rav says: All the [predicted] ends [of days] have passed, so the matter depends entirely upon repentance and good deeds. And Samuel says: It is sufficient for the mourner to endure in his mourning [i.e., and when the term of mourning is complete, the end of days will arrive, even without repentance].

This [dispute is analogous to] a Tannaitic dispute. Rabbi Eliezer says: If Israel repents, they are redeemed, and if not, they are not redeemed. Rabbi Joshua said to him: If they do not repent, will they not be redeemed at all? He said to him: The Holy One, blessed be He, will place a king over them whose decrees are as harsh as Haman’s, and this will restore them to the right path. (*B. Sanhedrin* 97b)

Repentance, and repentance alone, is the path to repair and redemption—not atonement, ceremonies, or priests performing atonement rituals. The actions of repentance on the part of individual human being is what matters. Sagi notes that this transformation of consciousness, the transition from a paradigm of atonement to one of repentance, took shape in Talmudic and post-Talmudic literature. As he writes:

The sages of Israel after the destruction are who innovated and emphasized this idea, liberating the notion of repentance from any ritual context, including atonement. The sages of Israel did not eliminate the idea of atonement, for it was part of the tradition of Israel. However, in their typical fashion, they imbued it with new meaning.[[5]](#endnote-5)

1. The Principle of Atonement, Not Repentance, in Beta Israel Customs

The present article, like my other articles, is mainly based on documentary anthropological work with *shimageloch* (Beta Israel sages) and the spiritual leadership, the *kessim*.

My discussions with Beta Israel leaders articulate clearly the differences between the experience and meaning of Yom Kippur in the Ethiopian tradition in contrast to the rabbinic one as experienced in today’s Orthodox Judaism. I will contrast statements of Daniel Mangesha and other Beta Israel sages, with articulations of contemporary Orthodoxy by R. Prof. David Hartman and Rabbi Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik.

We will begin with Hartman’s articulation of a rabbinic understanding of God’s closeness.

In the words of Hartman:

The image of the visible, triumphant Lord of History had to be rethought as a result of the destruction of the Second Temple and the loss of political sovereignty. How does a community sustain loyalty to God under political conditions that suggest a defeated rather than a victorious God? How do you make God’s presence and Torah to be seen as a living reality when the ongoing direct involvement of God in history is no longer evident? (2001: 10)

When issues of God’s closeness were raised with Ethiopian sages, they had a much different view.

I discussed these issues with Daniel. I also asked whether the lack of miracles in Jewish history is perceived as evidence of divine wrath, and, if it is, what God’s remoteness signifies. Can it be claimed that the absence of prophecy is a sign that God has abandoned the community and is no longer available in the sense of having a connection and a relationship? (Hartman 2001: 127). Daniel listened to my question with impatience—which is out of step with Ethiopian custom. In his answer[[6]](#endnote-6) I understood why. He responded in astonishment: How could one even entertain the idea that God abandoned Israel and is therefore no longer responsive? This is a brazen claim. What is the meaning of His silence? Why did God stop communicating with the prophets? Why did God stop performing miracles? His silence expresses our lack of understanding of His way of running this world. God’s ways and deeds are hidden. God has not disconnected or become distant from us. He is present at every step in our lives. The fact that God does not speak with His prophets, as in biblical times, indicates hiddenness, but not distance. And hiddenness is a result of sin.

I asked: “What sort of sin? Of one person against another, or between a person and God?” Daniel was surprised to hear this division between interpersonal transgressions and transgressions against God:

Sins are only between one person and another. The test is only with respect to one’s dealings with other human beings. Deceit, trickery, hatred—only these sins cause God’s hiddenness (though they do not make Him remote). Who do you think protected us in Ethiopia for thousands of years? Who do you think brought us from Ethiopia to Jerusalem? Who do you think protected us throughout the perilous journey? Certainly it was God.

Thus, according to Daniel the absence of miracles in history does not indicate distance, but hiddenness. According to him, God never abandoned the community of Israel, but His absence is seen as evidence of our sins, the problems in our interpersonal relationships. God did not leave; He is present. Silence and hiddenness express God’s closeness to the community. According to the Ethiopian sage, God’s hiddenness does not attest to the withdrawal of His presence from the world, but is a sign that human beings must withdraw into themselves and live with a greater sense of submissiveness. This demand is not meant to be like standard religious conceptions that expect human beings to go against their desires, feelings, needs, and wants; on the contrary, according to the Ethiopian sage, within this framework, human beings are expected to hear and heed the desires, feelings, needs, and wants of others. Indeed, the sense of submissiveness occupies an important place in the religious sensibilities of Ethiopian Jews. (See, at greater length, Shalom 2019: 657–82.)

Daniel’s theocentrism contrasts radically with the position of Hartman, who interprets the rabbinic tradition in an anthropocentric way. Hartman claims that the cessation of prophecy was an invitation to the participants in the covenant to become more active in it, as sages instead of prophets:

The absence of miracles in Israel’s history is not taken to imply divine anger or rejection. It is as if God’s historical distance is an invitation to His covenantal partner to take the initiative in the development of the Torah. The Rabbis respond to the diminishing signs of God’s visible power by seizing that initiative and utilizing the study of Torah to mediate His living presence. (2000: 268)

The notion that God withdrew after the destruction of the Temple was God’s call to human beings to rise up and take initiative. According to Hartman:

A revision of traditional theology began with a new reading of the language of divine power. “Who is as mighty as God?” (Exodus 15:11), the line sung when Israel crossed the sea, is midrashically taken to mean “Who is as silent as God?” “Who is like You, O Lord, among the mighty [*elim*]?” (Exodus 15:11)—“Who is like You among the dumb ones [*ilmim*]; who is like You that beholds the humiliation of his children and keeps silent?” (*Mekhilta*, *Shirah* 8) (2000: 267)

In other words, this novel interpretation of the scriptural text by the Rabbis of the Talmud creates a transformative process that leads from a paradigm of prophecy, in which God dictates history, to the paradigm of the sage, in which human beings takes God’s place.[[7]](#endnote-7) Hartman (2000) claims that the sage, whose authority derives from intellectual ability, rises to an unprecedentedly high level, higher even than that of a prophet, whose authority derives from miraculous signs from God. Examine the following Talmudic passage:

Rabbi Avdimi of Haifa says: “From the day that the Temple was destroyed, prophecy was taken from the prophets and given to the sages.” Is that to say that a Sage is not a prophet? This is what he is saying: Even though it was taken from the prophets, it was not taken from the sages. Ameimar said: And a sage is greater than a prophet, as it is stated: “And a prophet has a heart of wisdom” (Psalms 90:12). Who is compared to whom? You must say that the lesser is compared to the greater. (*B. Bava Batra* 12a)

What is the significance of the cessation of prophecy, according to the Rabbis? Did God stop speaking, or did the Rabbis boldly stand up and demand, “Stop speaking with us”?

One might contend that the absence of prophecy signifies that God has abandoned the community and is no longer available for a relationship or connection. Hartman makes the opposite claim:

The absence of prophecy does not signal rejection of covenantal man on the part of God, but rather, the call for him to become the active partner in the relationship … the movement from the prophet to the rabbinic sage of the *beit midrash . . .* God does not initiate the intensity of relationship, but seeks that it be initiated by the covenantal partner. (2001: 127)

Elsewhere, Hartman describes how a Torah scholar is a reflection of God:

Although based on divine revelation, the Torah became inseparable from the vast body of material generated by Talmudic interpretation. The rabbinic scholar rather than the prophet became the mediator of the Torah; his intellectual skills of analysis and interpretation elevated him to an unprecedented position of importance in determining the content of revelation. (1985: 36)

Thus, the Rabbis slowly reshaped Jewish consciousness from one of fate to one of destiny,[[8]](#endnote-8) through a historical, theological process in which the sage, a human being, becomes an autonomous partner in the interpretation of the divine text and in the transition from a prophetic community to a covenantal community.

According to Hartman, and contra Daniel’s view, the cessation of prophecy during the Second Temple era constitutes a formative moment in religious theology. There is a change in the nature of divine revelation. God no longer appears as a warrior, as during the Exodus, and His power no longer manifests in the quick defeat of Israel’s enemies. For that reason, the Rabbis of those generations turned to reinterpretation of Scripture. This was the transformation from the scriptural paradigm of a “prophetic community” to the Talmudic paradigm of a “covenantal community.” Daniel, the Ethiopian sage, would claim that God never withdrew from the world. He is present in every corner of the world, and in our lives. The real historical world is God’s realm of activity in every era.

Beta Israel include a consciousness of submission in the center of their worldview. God’s sovereignty organizes worldly events based on coherent and comprehensive divine calculations. As we will shortly see, human vision is limited. The wise man can reveal the larger picture, which does not require everyone to be the wise man, but rather to adopt a submissive attitude.

Take the well-known folktale that exemplifies Ethiopian theocentrism.

A wealthy rancher with many flocks hires a shepherd, but does not pay the salary. The rancher then goes on a business trip. While traveling he sees a sycamore tree by the side of the road, and he goes to rest in its shade. Yet, when he leaves, he forgets a bundle of money under the tree. Along comes the shepherd and sees the bundle of money. He takes the bundle, and goes off to work for a new employer. In the meantime, a poor person comes to rest under the shade of the tree, just as the wealthy person realizes that he had forgotten his money and returns to the tree to look for it. The wealthy man asks the poor person if he found the money, but when the poor person denies finding it, the wealthy man accuses him of theft, demanding his money back. In the end, the wealthy man kills the poor person.

There was a holy man, a monk, who set out to live a life of suffering by living in the branches of that very tree. He saw the goings on and was shocked. After the murderer left, he called out to God: “Master of the Universe, why have You done this? The missing money was taken by a different person, and the poor man had come only to rest in the shade. Why was he killed?!” God responded:

Do not judge, for you do not know all, and I do. The shepherd took only the money he was owed, for the rancher had not paid him. I saw the offense, and I heard his prayer. What the rancher did not give willingly was given unwillingly. As for the murdered poor man, know that he deserved death. When the murdered was but an unborn baby, the poor man’s father had murdered the rancher’s father. The son of the murderer has damended the blood of his murdered father. (Wurmbrand 48–9)

Fate and submission play an important role in this narrative. God is sovereign, and He manipulates events based on His broad and coherent view of things. Humans see only parts of things, suggesting that the story teaches humans that they are not in control of their own fate, but instead must appreciate divine justice. In the context of Ethiopian-Jewish culture, the story encourages submission before divine authority and acceptance of His vision. Like the monk, a person comes close to God through submission (and asceticism), and through appreciating the divine plan and justice. As Wurmbrand explains the story: “A person avoids frustration at the seeming injustices by reflecting on divine action. The person must always appreciate humans’ limited perspective, and that true justice appears only with the wider vision of God. That is why the story ends with a common aphorism: ‘A person judges based on partial knowledge, but God punishes knowing all’” (49).

Beita Israel tradition combines practices that are grounded to a great degree on ideas from the biblical period that were colored by the spirit of the biblical prophets, which are merged with Ethiopian values of innocence, integrity, simplicity, and closeness to God, all grounded in a theocentric worldview. These values are expressed in stories and experienced, and are manifest in a life of personal connection and deemphasis of legalism. This is not the Oral Torah of the rabbinic tradition. It is an alternative tradition[[9]](#endnote-9) Beta Israel literature—The Prayers of the Falashas, The Death of Moses, and the Death of Aaron—all contain apocalyptic motifs related to the sanctity of Shabbat, and they have had a vast influence on Beta Israel religious culture and life.[[10]](#endnote-10) In addition to sever punishment for those who violate Shabbat and descriptions of the place of Shabbat in saving the sinners and rewarding the righteous in the underworld, the works articulate a theocentric worldview and the distance between humans and the world of mystery. The practical lesson is that humans should submit themselves to God and to the mystery and power of Shabbat, against which humans are powerless. Beta Israel emphasizes the role of keeping Shabbat to the point of martyrdom, and does not give dispensations for saving lives. Saving lives does not overcome commandments, in contrast to the rabbinic tradition.

Here lies the difference between Hartman and Daniel. Unlike Hartman, who claimed that God removed Himself from the world out of recognition of the value and abilities of human beings—that is, human beings did not drive God out of the world, rather, God withdrew Himself from the world for the benefit of human beings—Daniel claims that God’s hiddenness is not a sign that God recognizes human worth, but rather of God’s acknowledgment of sins on an interpersonal level. The individual person must limit himself out of absolute submission to God.

The theological difference between these two views is readily discernible. One reflects the consciousness of submission embodied in the figure of the prophet; the other reflects a consciousness of dignity embodied in the figure of the sage. The difference between these two forms of consciousness has implications for the conception of God, human beings, and their relationship. As Uhrlich explains:

Both forms of consciousness recognize the existential gap between God and human beings, but they view it in a different light . . . The consciousness of dignity produces within the inferior side the need to lift itself up, so that it is worthy of encountering the greater party. The inferior side—in this case, humanity—must artificially, temporarily attain a state of respectability, so it can bridge the gap between itself and God and become worthy of encountering Him. In contrast, consciousness of submission generates with the inferior party the need to appear meeker and emphasize the gap between itself and the greater party. Through its lowliness and self-effacement, the inferior party demonstrates its dependence on the other. Only by emphasizing this dependence can the inferior stand before the superior. (Ehrlich 1994: 252)

I believe that the distinction between these two forms of consciousness, the consciousness of submission embodied in the figure of the prophet and the consciousness of dignity embodied in the figure of the sage, leads to the identification of the Beta Israel community as a community that espouses a paradigm of submission, whereas rabbinic Judaism espouses a paradigm of dignity. In my view, this distinction parallels Hartman’s distinction between the “covenant of the Exodus” and the “Sinai covenant” (Bleich 1997: 169–273; Hartman 1985: 229–55).

Following his teacher, Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Hartman distinguishes between the “covenant of the Exodus” and the “Sinai covenant”:

The difference between the two models is that the Exodus model makes Jewish activity in history dependent upon a perception of direct divine intervention, whereas the Sinai model holds that God has conferred responsibility upon the Jewish people to decide for themselves when they have found realistic opportunities for involvement in history—with all the risks involved. (1985: 231)

According to Hartman, the covenant of the Exodus is theocentric, and it has room for divine providence and messianic hope. In contrast, the Sinai covenant is anthropocentric, and in it, the ethos of reason plays a major role in shaping history. Humanity does not lead, but is led. In contrast:

The giving of the Torah at Sinai can be understood as constituting a radical shift in God’s relationship to human history . . . This may be seen as a shift by God away from influencing human history through direct miraculous intervention, since He now began to influence it through the continuing historical existence of a normative community. Just as Maimonides considered that God founded the orderly processes of nature at the moment of creation and made them into a vehicle of His directive influence in history . . . The *mitzvot* given at Sinai represent divine self-limitation for the sake of expanding the range of human responsibility. (Hartman 1985: 231–2)

As I described in my doctorate, dialectic is the core of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s thought.[[11]](#endnote-11) Therefore, whereas for Rabbi Soloveitchik the two covenants—“the covenant of the Patriarchs” and “the covenant of Sinai”—dwell side by side as two distinct chambers of the heart of Israel, Hartman explicitly expresses his preference for the Sinai covenant:

My reason for preferring the Sinai model is that I do not wish to divide my world into two separate realms, one of which is characterized by autonomous action based upon human understanding of the divine norm and the other by anticipation of and dependence upon divine interventions. I prefer to see God’s will for Jewish history, just like God’s will for Jewish communal life, as channeled exclusively through the efforts of the Jewish community to achieve the aims of the Torah given at Sinai. (1985: 231–2; Kaplan 1988: 107–14)

Hartman indeed prefers the Sinai covenant, though he agrees that a combination of the Exodus and Sinai narratives shaped Jewish historical consciousness:

The synthesis of the Exodus and Sinai narratives shaped the historical consciousness of the Jewish people. They gave expression to its national identity as a free people . . . Egypt points the way to Sinai . . . The integration of Sinai and Egypt as national symbols protected us from falling victim to self-pity. At Sinai we discovered who we were and what we are expected to become. We were a community of slaves charged with the task of embodying hope in its life. A slave is enslaved in the moment. He has no history, memory, or aspiration. (2002: 388–95)

That is, in Hartman’s view, the Sinai covenant is primary because it sanctifies the ethos of human reason, according to which God gave to the Jewish people at Sinai the Torah, by means of which they can guide history.

Returning now to the Ethiopian sage, it is certain that he does not revere the Sinai covenant as Hartman does. For the Ethiopian sage, this idea would be deemed impossible, illogical, even absurd. The Ethiopian sage gives primacy to relying on and expecting divine intervention. Reducing or limiting God’s presence in the world is impossible—it simply cannot happen in reality—according to the Ethiopian sage.

The inexorable conclusion is that we must distinguish between two theological conceptions. Beta Israel espouses the Exodus model, whereas the rabbinic movement espouses the Sinai model. For one who adopts the covenant of the Exodus, redemption is the result of absolute submission to God’s commandment. In contrast, for one who adopts the Sinai covenant, redemption is the result of lack of submission to God’s command.

Given this background, a question emerges: Did this rabbinic transformation influence the Beta Israel Jewish community, or did they develop a religious tradition without that revolution? In my earlier studies, I claimed that Beta Israel is not similar to any of the groups that comprise the mosaic of Talmudic Judaism. That is, the Beta Israel community has traditions that reflect the scriptural heritage without Talmudic alterations. On one hand is a Judaism closer to the scriptural model, constructed within a theocentric model of faith, which emphasizes the principle of atonement, and on the other is rabbinic Judaism, constructed from within an anthropocentric conception of faith, which emphasizes the principle of repentance. We can now understand why, in the theological world of Beta Israel, “repentance is not atonement and atonement is not repentance.” Indeed, while the Talmudic sages played up the principle of repentance, as Sagi demonstrates in his article at length, the Beta Israel community continued to espouse the principle of atonement, thus perpetuating the experience of the scriptural era. In interviews with community leaders, it emerges that Ethiopian Jewry spoke of atonement and not repentance. Kes Elli Wenda explained that the concept of repentance places humans and the center, having a God to change due to human influence upon Him. Atonement places God in the center, since atonement is granted exclusively to do God’s grace and will. This conceptualization has implications for the atmosphere of the holidays. Repentance, in Beta Israel, is much closer to the vague notion of “introspection.” This enables a paradoxical action: On one hand, the ability to plumb the depths of our personality and trace the source of our sinful behavior, and, on the other hand, internalization of the notion that, in Sagi’s words, “Atonement is a metaphysical occurrence, beyond human capacity. A person cannot atone; it hinges on that which is beyond him” ().Moreover, in the biblical conception, as still reflected in the Ethiopian tradition, the element of collective consciousness is a fundamental element of worship of God.[[12]](#endnote-12) Given this, it seems that the element of collective consciousness, which endures in Ethiopian culture, can indicate, inter alia, a key difference between these two traditions. Collectivism, on one hand, promotes a philosophical, political, religious, economic, and social worldview that emphasizes the interdependence of people. On the other hand, individualism promotes a political philosophical approach that emphasizes the sovereignty of the individual over his life. That is, the question is whether the individual is perceived as an independent, autonomous, distinct unit, in which case the community is not the center, but rather the individual person is the center, or whether the opposite is the case, and each person determines the right thing to do in relation to the goals and objectives of the collective, in which case the community is more important and significant. Which is more correct? What is freedom of thought? Does the good of the community take priority over the good of the individual, or does the good of the individual supersede the good of the community? The Ethiopian sage Daniel Mengesha said, aflame with passion:

In Israel (that is, in Judaism), in our religion, there is no such thing as individual introspection. A person is not alone. He is always part of something, of a community. In Ethiopia, when it is time to eat, everyone eats from one plate. Here in Israel, everyone has their own plate. Everyone thinks he is God. In Ethiopia, we lived with faith that “there is none but Him.” Only God is great.[[13]](#endnote-13)

According to Daniel, the Ethiopian sage, this lifestyle allows us to feel alone. Loneliness and solitariness of human existence are the source of fear’s energy. Lack of fear, in contrast, is the secret that enables people to expand their love for fellow human beings, to fill themselves with compassion, and to be impartial. Paradoxically, a consciousness of submission leads an Ethiopian away from diminished, fearful consciousness toward a consciousness imbued with profound serenity and completely liberated from fear: from a consciousness that lives and experiences itself in a diminished state to consciousness that lives and experiences itself in its fullness; from consciousness that lives its life in relative slumber to a fully alert consciousness. Ethiopian Jewry, which, as noted, continued the Jewish tradition rooted in Scripture and the experience of the Temple, seems to emphasize, in its religious world, the principle of collective consciousness more than that of individual consciousness (Corinaldi 1998; Shalom 2016; Ziv [?]; see, at greater length, Shalom 2019). Collective consciousness can provide confidence in the ontological existence of humanity. That is, paradoxically, it seems, the absence of the concept of the individual personality can prevent feelings of alienation, and the stronger the consciousness of individual existence, the more profound the sense of estrangement (Sagi 2002). In the Ethiopian world, as mentioned, a person does not come alone to court, but is accompanied by the entire community. The entire community stands together before God, Who is merciful. Under such conditions, the day is not threatening. It is not a day of awe, but a day of joy.

It therefore seems that given the situation of the Ethiopian migrant society in the State of Israel, there is, for the first time, an encounter between two difference consciousnesses of Jewish faith. The encounter between Israeli Jews and Jews of Ethiopian origin is not only an encounter between new immigrants and veteran immigrants, between Blacks and Whites, sharing a slice of this world and fighting over resources, but also an encounter between opposed models of Judaism in general and Yom Kippur in particular. This conclusion contains significant implications for the encounter between those of Ethiopian origin and the reality dictated to them from the ideological, organizational, and halakhic base of the Israeli rabbinic establishment. This finds expression in the meaning that Yom Kippur has within the two traditions: the rabbinic tradition, based on a Talmudic conception and animated by the “covenant of Sinai,” and the Ethiopian tradition, rooted in a scriptural conception and animated by the spirit of the “covenant of the Exodus.” Furthermore, this arena of discourse can serve as a key to a useful interpretive view of the Jewish religious culture of the Beta Israel community. If so, what should be the connection between the rabbinical hegemony and the community that preserves the ancient tradition, and the rabbinic interpretation that does not depend on the rabbinic tradition? What are the appropriate ways to create dialogue between the two traditions? What are the appropriate ways to enable dialogue between two different cultures? The appropriate framework does not position the parties one against the other in a hierarchical and judgmental system, as the exiting rabbinic hierarchy has often done toward Beta Israel practices and traditions. An appropriate framework enables a reanalysis of the elements that shaped and that still shape the discourse on religious experience, and thus enables angles for self-examination and the search for the self, as an invitation for a slow process of study and rebuilding of Jewish identity. That is to say, positioning the religious culture of Ethiopian Jews in this book as a legitimate tradition in the chain of events of the Oral Law, not via the Mishnah and Gemara, makes it possible to examine the question of how the discourse on the position of Ethiopian Jewish religious culture has been conducted until now, and how it should appropriately be conducted in the future. This is not the end of the verse. This is the beginning of a new path.

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**[Funding:** Please add: “This research received no external funding” or “This research was funded by NAME OF FUNDER, grant number XXX” and “The APC was funded by XXX”. Check carefully that the details given are accurate and use the standard spelling of funding agency names at https://search.crossref.org/funding. Any errors may affect your future funding.]

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**Acknowledgments:** In this section, you can acknowledge any support given which is not covered by the author contribution or funding sections. This may include administrative and technical support, or donations in kind (e.g., materials used for experiments).

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**Appendix A**

The appendix is an optional section that can contain details and data supplemental to the main text—for example, explanations of experimental details that would disrupt the flow of the main text but nonetheless remain crucial to understanding and reproducing the research shown; figures of replicates for experiments of which representative data is shown in the main text can be added here if brief, or as Supplementary data. Mathematical proofs of results not central to the paper can be added as an appendix.]

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Notes

1. While ‘Beta Israel,’ is also acceptable, ‘Bete Israel’ is considered to be more correct; in this article, I have used Beta Israel. For more on the meaning of the name Beta Israel, see Eshkoli [1943: ch. 1: 1–12]; Haim. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. It is worth noting that in Ethiopia it was customary to give multiple names not only to holidays, but to people as well. In general, an Ethiopian has at least four or five names. From these names, we learn the different meanings that this person had for relatives. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Sagi [year] *Biblical Encyclopedia* Vol. 8 “Teshuvah,” 949. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This is the version of this passage as it appears in a Cairo Genizah fragment (MS Kaufmann 229.2) held in the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See previous note*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ethiopian custom is to answer with a story, *midrash*, or metaphor. In keeping with this, Daniel began with a *midrash*. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The Talmud’s story of the Oven of Akhnai (*B. Bava Metz’ia* 59b) is the text that Hartman is commenting on in the essay cited and a key to understanding his view. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Noam Zohar (in *The Jewish Political Tradition* [Hartman (2000: 278–9]) likewise describes theological processes that can reshape a consciousness of destiny. Commenting on Rava’s comment that those who rise before a Torah scroll but not a Torah sage are foolish:

If Rava’s dictum is put in theological terms, it attains a striking boldness. People ought to show greater respect to the Rabbis, because the Rabbis’ law is better than that originally given by God! This elevated conception of the midrashic enterprise, which may well have been shared by many of the classical sages, certainly calls for some explanation. Perhaps nothing less than such boldness could support fidelity to Torah in the face of the powerful critique—expressed saliently in Paul’s epistles—that fulfilling the demands of God’s law is incompatible with human weakness. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The Talmud records a tale in which Moses visits the study hall of Rabbi Akiva, where he was not recognized and asked to sit at the back. This is parallel to the Ethiopian community in Israel, which is also asked to sit at the back. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See previous note. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. In my doctorate, I called for “a systematic reconstruction of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s thought, which, at its base, is not so . . . Rabbi Soloveitchik systematically addresses two typologies, a typology of fate and a typology of destiny, which reflect two fundamentally opposing channels.” See also Brill (2011: 118–44); Schweitzer (Sagi) (1978–79: 247–57. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. As Rabbi Reuven Tal Yaso, a Torah scholar of Ethiopian origin, meticulously demonstrated, the principle of repentance in the biblical era is anchored in collective, public consciousness, whereas the principle of repentance in the rabbinic period is anchored in individual, private consciousness. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. This conversation took place in Beersheba several months before Daniel’s death. There is a great, important storehouse of knowledge; we must interview and document the elders of the community to preserve this knowledge, or it will be lost.

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