**Preparing a Scientific Edition of the “*Beta Yisrael*” (Ethiopian Jewry) Traditions**

**Israel Science Foundation (ISF)**

1. **Scientific Background**

The multigenerational separation between *Beit Yisrael*[[1]](#footnote-1)and Jews in the other diasporas led to differences in traditions and customs, rendering the *Beit Yisrael* community unique and separate from Jews in Israel and abroad.[[2]](#footnote-2) It seems that its significant difference from other diasporas led the rabbinic hegemony to doubt its Jewry and to divest it of its religious customs. Many scholars tried to understand and explain this religious culture using tools from the social sciences, by relating to questions of ethnic origin, conversion, gaps in customs, and even skin color; or by using tools from the rabbinic tradition.[[3]](#footnote-3) We can say that there was an intrinsic bilateral influence, wherein the rabbinic world drew upon the scholars’ opinions, while the latter drew upon those of the rabbinic world. In fact, both are mistaken, with the errors stemming from the same source – approaching the issue from an external perspective. The first mistake is examining the religion of *Beit Yisrael* from the Orthodox point of view. This means that, until lately, the religious culture of *Beit Yisrael* was only studied within the framework of the Orthodox halakhic world. The second mistake was examining the culture of the *Beit Yisrael* community from an external perspective, as many social scientists are wont to do.

This study is concerned with collecting, making accessible, and analyzing all the traditions and customs of the *Beit Yisrael* religious culture, using tools from the disciplines of theology and religious practice. In the proposed study I wish to progress from **explicating to understanding**. The line between explicating and understanding is blurry, as they intersect in several areas. However, as Avi Sagi says, the distinction between the two is the basis for an important and systematizing set of terms: “Understanding is based on the datum as it appears before us, and the act of understanding is consistent given the datum. The act of explicating is reductive while the act of understanding is not; it is managed as an explication that exposes that which is ‘there’ as it is. It does not intend to control the datum, but rather, to clarify it.”[[4]](#footnote-4) This study aims to understand the faith and practice of Ethiopian Jews from their own perspective, in their terms. The proposed study will not focus on the commonly held perceptions about the *Beit Yisrael* community. It aspires to deepen the acquaintance of the scholarly community with this group’s identity, as it itself perceives this. For this, we will try to understand their narrative and the unique characteristics of their Judaism. This will allow us, among others, to learn from the disparity between this community and other Jewish communities about the unique place this community holds in the mosaic of Jewish traditions, concerning the evolvement of the Oral Torah.[[5]](#footnote-5) Their distinctiveness is their restoration, since lacking familiarity with the Mishnah, Talmud, and the traditions of the rabbinic Sages, not necessarily because of the separation between this community and the other diasporas,[[6]](#footnote-6) *Beit Beit Yisrael* became one of the most unique and fascinating communities in the Jewish world today. This includes insights about the encounter between Ethiopian Jews and the rabbinic establishment in Israel. Encounters during the last few decades between Israeli Jews and Ethiopian Jews are not only encounters between new and seasoned immigrants, between black and white people who share a strip of common reality and fight over resources, but they are also encounters between two different models of Judaism.

**A.1. *Beit Yisrael* and the Ethiopian Environment: The Researchers’ Perspective Regarding the Community of Ethiopian Jews**

The current state of the research on Ethiopian Jewry[[7]](#footnote-7) emphasizes the claim that the *Beit Yisrael* community was cut off from any rabbinic halakhic development and is bound up in a Jewish tradition that is based on a biblical spirit.[[8]](#footnote-8) This claim is found in the ethnological fact that the Christians in Ethiopia, members of the Habashi (Ethiopian) Church, as well as the community of *Beta Yisrael*, both see themselves as descendants of the ancient Israelites.[[9]](#footnote-9) Therefore, *Beta Yisrael* can only be properly understood within their Ethiopian context. As Kaplan says: “The general Ethiopian history and culture filled a decisive role in the development of the *Beta Yisrael* community. If we put aside the question that many asked: Who are the Jews of Ethiopia? The studies that exist today, as with any other Jewish group around the globe, leave no doubt that the literature, music, religious hierarchy, economic specialization, and names of the *Beit Yisrael* community can only be understood in light of the wider Ethiopian background.”[[10]](#footnote-10) *Beta Yisrael* was never closed off from its surroundings and its influences, and therefore we should not rule out interactions and interrelationships between *Beta Yisrael* and its Ethiopian surroundings.

The current study will not deal with the question of this community’s Jewish ethnicity but will focus, among other matters, on the degree to which it is similar or different from its non-Jewish Ethiopian surroundings.[[11]](#footnote-11) The available research points to two trends regarding this issue. One group of scholars[[12]](#footnote-12) tends to view *Beit Yisrael* as an entity that is distinct from its Ethiopian surroundings, underscoring its differences and its unique beliefs and customs. In some cases, it even ignores the community’s ties with its local social complex.[[13]](#footnote-13) A different group of scholars[[14]](#footnote-14) views this community as an integral part of the wider Ethiopian history and culture, regarding their general identity, and emphasizes the similarities between *Beit Yisrael* and its Ethiopian Christian environment. Each of these groups puts forth arguments for their claim, and a broader discussion on this topic is beyond the scope of this paper. For example, Valdman writes:

One cannot understand the roots of the tradition of Ethiopian Jewry without attending to the tradition of Ethiopian Christians […]. Even the interpretation of the Torah and its commandments, as transmitted by the spiritual leaders of the Ethiopian Jews, is very similar to the interpretation that existed among the Christian clergy. Later holy texts that the Ethiopian Jews have are like Christian Ethiopian writings. The prayers and their melodies, synagogue customs, the codes of behavior practiced by the Qes and the *nezirim* – all these, and more, are very similar to what is found and common in the Ethiopian Church.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Despite the similarities, Valdman’s claim is true also of other Jewish communities, though it sounds particular to Ethiopian Jewry. The spiritual customs of Moroccan Jews are also similar to the spiritual customs of the Moroccans – including the prayers and the melodies; the clothing, customs, and melodies of rabbis in Western Europe are more similar to their non-Jewish surroundings than to those of Jews who live elsewhere.[[16]](#footnote-16) Despite their differences of opinion on the question of Ethiopian Jewry’s similarity to their surroundings, both groups of scholars agree that the traditions of this community differ from those of the Orthodox-rabbinic tradition. This difference is the result of a multigenerational relative disconnect, which had far-reaching consequences for the formation of the identity of Ethiopian Jews and their lifestyle as Jews in Ethiopia.[[17]](#footnote-17)

While many studies compare the Ethiopian Jews to the Ethiopian society that surrounds them, these studies know little about the cultural characteristics of Ethiopian Jews. Kaplan writes:

It seems that very little effort has been invested in the attempt to define the Ethiopian characteristics of the Jewish culture in this country. There are many difficulties in examining this topic: First – many of those who wrote about Ethiopian Jewry lack even minimal knowledge of the history of Ethiopian society and culture. Second – given the problems that arose regarding the Jewish status of *Beit Yisrael*, some authors certainly assumed that they would help serve this community’s interests by focusing on its Jewish identity and not necessarily on its Ethiopian tradition. Third – other may have been misled by the fact that *Beit Yisrael* themselves tend to emphasize the aspects of their culture that differentiates them from their Ethiopian neighbors, and not the similarities they share.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Valdman also protests the ignorance regarding Ethiopian Jewry: “The uniqueness and distance of Ethiopian Jewry, together with the abundance of concealment and the complexity of its traditions and lifestyles, often led to misunderstandings and the unbearable ease of focusing on erroneous information and prejudice. Some people expressed opinions that were not based on reality. Elaborate explanations were written, including various objections to bringing Ethiopian Jews to Israel.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

The available studies, from both groups of scholars, undoubtedly contribute to the proposed research.[[20]](#footnote-20) In general, any study of Ethiopian Jewry, from any perspective, significantly contributes to the current state of scholarship on Ethiopian Jewry. However, the proposed research is aware of the difficulty in clearly and accurately presenting authentic traditions, since we see that in many cases people confuse ancient traditions for new ones. In addition, in many cases the interviewee comes with an agenda and a trend that he wishes to promote. Therefore, the move from explicating to understanding is, among others, also a description of the customs from an inner perspective – how members of the community view the world from the inside, and not just how scholars view the community from an external perspective.

**A.2. Ethiopian Jewry and the Rabbinic Hegemony**

The identity and self-perception of Ethiopian Jews had an impact only on their religious ceremonies, but primarily a deep theological impact on their lives as Jews. The roles of *Beit Yisrael*’s spiritual leaders, the Qes and the priests, are very different from the roles of spiritual leaders in other Jewish communities. Historical events that accompanied the development of the Jewish people after the destruction of the Second Temple had no impact on the *Beit Yisrael* community. This community also lacked the Jewish textual canon that the Sages developed after the destruction of the Second Temple. Today, *Beit Yisrael* is firmly anchored in the biblical perception and the tradition it follows is the biblical tradition, based on a literal reading of the Torah and on later interpretations. Meaning, while the Sages of the Ethiopian community interpreted their Judaism directly from the Torah, where the Bible served as a foundational text, the rabbinic tradition interpreted its Judaism directly from the Talmud, which served as its foundational text. It seems that the considerable difference between Ethiopian Jewry and Jews from other diasporas is what caused the State of Israel’s rabbinic hegemony to doubt the Judaism of *Beit Yisrael* over three decades ago, and to strip it of all its religious customs. The religious culture of *Beit Yisrael* today is, to a large degree, studied only within the framework of the Orthodox halakhic world. The proposed study is an attempt to move from a process of explication to a process of understanding: to examine the tradition of the Ethiopian Jewish community using tools from its own discipline, and through these tools to try and understand how the Ethiopian Jews viewed the Jewish world. A study of this type will allow us to trace the developmental process of the Jewish tradition from the perspective of the Ethiopian world. In the proposed study we intend to use a different lexicon, one which examines Ethiopian Jewry from a different research angle than what was accepted until now. This will be done not by invalidating previous studies, but by broadening and completing them.

**A.3. Between Identification and Identity**

Following Sagi, we will rely on the distinction between identification and identity.[[21]](#footnote-21) According to Sagi, the act of identification deals with the question of how people are perceived by others, turning the other into an object that is important for the identifier. This is an external act in which the other is characterized by certain traits, while his voice is not heard. In contrast, identity […] is primarily the actual life story that describes the totality of the behaviors, practices, myths, memories, and awareness of the person reporting them.[[22]](#footnote-22) Identification is an external characterization, and therefore one that is based on premises that do not necessarily rely on a deep acquaintance and do not necessarily reflect reality. A study of this type intends to fulfill needs that are important for the identifier, at the expense of the precision of the conclusions and scientific insights. The need that drives the identifier may lead him to hasty conclusions about the characteristics of the community. In a study that focuses on the identity of the community members, it is important to rely upon a deeper acquaintance with the culture and language – the proposed study greatly emphasizes its intention to fill this void, as well as the knowledge of the scholars that are involved with the community and its surrounding society. In the proposed study we wish to move from identification to identity – to give voice to the Ethiopian Jews, and not describe them with the voice of a different culture. We will therefore try to listen to them to learn who they are, as opposed to telling them who they are.

Similarly, Sagi posits that “ontology is not the experience of the life of an individual on his own […]. The personal ontology always digresses to the general one. We think of existence in a language that is always beyond us. The particular aspect itself is a certain type of the universal. […] The term ‘I’ will always be marked in its relation to the human multitude. Furthermore, it is not only the language that transfers us to the universal, but also our existence is such: As people we live with other people.”[[23]](#footnote-23) As the poet John Donne wrote: “No man is an island, entire of itself; Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Our work will focus on the meaning of Ethiopian Jewry in the present while looking at the Ethiopian surroundings in which it developed, including the Christian and the Muslim, as well as looking at the wider Jewish context. Based on the many extant studies on Ethiopian Jewry,[[25]](#footnote-25) the present study hopes to promote a comprehensive study in the field of Judaica that will examine this tradition from historical, comparative, philological, and philosophical research approaches.

1. **The Aim of the Study and its Anticipated Importance**

One of the aims of this scientific edition is to provide tools for understanding the development of the Ethiopian Jews’ different texts and traditions. This includes making the information accessible and comprehensive for scholars, encompassing the entirety of the Ethiopian Jews’ traditions. Another aim of this edition is to lay a foundation for research that attempts to treat the “identity,” as opposed to the “identification,” which characterizes so many studies in the field. For this, we will try to listen to the Ethiopian Jews, as well as to the Christian and Muslim environment in Ethiopia, to learn about the identity of *Beit Yisrael* as it emerges from their texts and their words. A study of this sort will allow us to trace the development of the Jewish identity in Ethiopia, given the reciprocal relationship between *Beit Yisrael* and its general Ethiopian surroundings. In addition, we will also compare the traditions that relate to the processes of the textual transmission of the Bible (“*matzhaf kadus*”) - and the processes of transmitting the oral traditions throughout the generations. This description, based on the comparison between the extant texts, will be accompanied by an examination of the ancient versions of the biblical text in the Ge’ez language while noting deviations from the original, and extensively documenting the changes in versions as they are reflected in the *matzhaf kadus* and the other texts. Steven Kaplan posits that:

There is a rich literature on the Jewish identity of *Beta Yisrael* and their relationship with world Jewry. […] However, the main claim here is that despite the contribution of these books to our knowledge about the Jews of Ethiopia, they should be treated mainly as important primary sources specifically for understanding certain aspects of the absorbing population. These books should be read primarily, so it has been claimed, not as books **about** but as texts that were written **by**.[[26]](#footnote-26)

The proposed study will allow us to make accessible not only sources that are unknown to most scholars, but also that are inaccessible to them, because of language barriers and the like, a lack of acquaintance even among earlier scholars from whom they had learned of the *Beta Yisrael* tradition (see Valdman and Kaplan, quoted above), and more. The present study wishes to combine all forces: Ethiopian scholars with others, interviews with Ethiopian Christians who lived near the Jewish villages, and with the Ethiopian Jewish elders and sages who are still alive. Given the passing of generations, this is a critical moment in time that will not repeat itself.

In addition, an edition of this sort will allow scholars to learn of the differences and uniqueness of the *Beta Yisrael* community, their beliefs and customs, in various fields. However, the edition will also provide the understanding that one cannot ignore the context of *Beta Yisrael* and its relationship with its local social environment, and from the many points of similarity that exist between the Ethiopian Christian population and *Beta Yisrael*. The aim of the edition is, therefore, to point out instances in the religious culture of *Beta Yisrael* that characterize them as a separate and unique group on the one hand, while on the other hand, to understand that a significant portion of these customs can be understood in light of the wider Ethiopian background. Yet we should primarily understand that this is a biblical Judaism. As Steven Kaplan says: “The many biblical foundations in the Ethiopian tradition are among the more salient witnesses for the strong pre-Christian Jewish influences of the Ethiopian culture.”[[27]](#footnote-27) The edition will encourage us to view the religious-faith background as one of the keys to understanding the social and cultural world of the Ethiopian Jews from the *Beta Yisrael* community. However, this community cannot be viewed as homogenous. This study wishes to expose the shades and differences even within the community itself.

The framework of this study will not allow us to encompass all of *Beta Yisrael*’s liturgical corpus. It will focus on the customs, laws, and testimonies that we need to explain the changes in versions, both written and oral, as given by informants throughout *Beta Yisrael*’s history in Ethiopia. However, we also need to clarify that these limitations do not contradict the definitions of the edition. It does not mean that we will bring a limited selection of traditions. Rather, we will focus on the places where there are contradictions between different Ethiopian Jewish traditions or contradictions between Ethiopian Jews’ traditions and rabbinic traditions.

1. **A Detailed Description of the Proposed Study**

While researching the *Beit Yisrael* community, I did some documentary anthropological fieldwork that included textual analyses, as well as meetings and interviews with the spiritual leaders – the Qessotch and the שמגלוץ'.[[28]](#footnote-28) The Qessotch claim that *Beit Yisrael* is one of the only Jewish groups that succeeded in preserving a tradition parallel to the rabbinic tradition and is not like any other Jewish group that comprises the Jewish nation today. In this edition, we will try to provide a multidimensional picture of the significance of this claim. How, and if, can a primary form be determined? Does the religious state continue without change for thousands of years? What, indeed, is this tradition? And in what way do they differ from their Christian-Muslim surroundings? And if there is an oral tradition, how do they preserve the continuity of lawmaking? Does the world of religious Ethiopian knowledge have a system? And if so, what is it? Which of the customs in the Ethiopian community are ancient, and which started in Ethiopia? What is the role of the spiritual leaders, the Qessotch – are they like rabbis, or do they fill a different role such as lawmakers, guides, or perhaps priests? What is the attitude toward learning Torah? What is the meaning of prayer? And many other topics. We will try to understand their world through a multidimensional view of a number of identity circles, using as many circles as possible – the yearly cycle, daily life, Jewish life ceremonies as celebrated in the families and the communities, and more.

**C.3. Methodology**

Several years ago, I attended an international conference in Gondar, Ethiopia. After the conference, I decided to visit two other cities – Lalibela and Aksum – as well as several villages where Jews resided, in the Tigray and Gondar regions. These places are a treasury for many reasons and comprehensive research there will afford unheard-of innovations to the field of research on Ethiopia. I will now present a detailed description of the proposed study:

1. If we want to broaden the limits of research on holy texts beyond the current findings, we must carry out research in collaboration with Ethiopian scholars in Ethiopia who are experts in the field. They speak the Amharic and Tigris languages; they are approachable and maintain continuous relations with the Christian population who lived proximal to the Jewish villages. In addition, the University of Gondar announced the opening of a center for the study of Ethiopian Jewry. In my opinion, we will see far-reaching archeological discoveries.[[29]](#footnote-29) Last year, in 2022, two international conferences took place between Jerusalem and Gondar. In the conference that took place in Gondar, we announced[[30]](#footnote-30) the establishment of a center for the study of Ethiopian Jewry in the University of Gondar. We agreed upon collaborations, student exchanges, and more.
2. The proposed study will rely upon texts that will be located in collaboration with Ethiopian researchers. The texts will be located in archives, mainly in Europe and Ethiopia. It is imperative to match the languages in the texts to the linguistic abilities of the research staff. There are a number of archives that we intend to check, mainly in Europe but also in Addis Ababa.
3. In addition, we will also gain knowledge through verbal interviews with the elders and religious leaders of the *Beit Yisrael* community who live in Israel, as well as with the elders and religious leaders of the Christian community in Ethiopia who lived near the Jews’ villages.[[31]](#footnote-31) Previous interviews with members of the Ethiopian community, especially with its spiritual leaders, occasionally included conflicting descriptions of the authentic or precise nature of some custom or other. This is clearly the result of memory loss and confusion from things that they heard from modern sources which created a mixture of “authentic” and newer traditions. This necessitates a special interdisciplinary team of researchers who will provide a comprehensive picture. The researchers themselves, and their research assistants, will conduct the interviews. It is important to remember that the type of questions asked and the topics addressed will succeed in eliciting good answers.
4. The research methodology in Bible studies and the study of the Mishnah and Talmud literature is usually philological-historical, and to some degree comparative. The comparison is usually between elements in Jewish culture and elements in the surrounding culture, proximal in time and place, cultures that supposedly influenced each other. The study of the era of the Mishnah and Talmud often includes a comparison between the Jewish world and the world of the Greeks, Hellenists, and Romans, as well as between the Jewish and Christian worlds. The sociological-anthropological method, by contrast, compares not only these cases but also modern society vs a simple, or tribal, society (which, in the past, was termed “primitive”). This study will use both these methods.

The main part of the edition will deal with comparative research. This will be a comprehensive comparative edition which, besides the comparison between the Ethiopian tradition and the rabbinic tradition, will also include a comparison to Christianity and Islam in Ethiopia, based on current data. Meaning, it aims to learn about the differences between different traditions. This synoptic edition will include the compared presentation of several verbal, printed, and manuscript sources. The edition will offer scholarly interpretation (historical, cultural political, and theological) for the differences and changes in versions of the texts of Ethiopian Jews, including the inner comparisons between traditions that simultaneously exist/ed within parts of the *Beit Yisrael* community.

**C.3. Initial Findings**

First, there is a lot of scholarship on Ethiopian Jewry. The information collected thus far is sad, but it needs to be gathered and organized after a review of the materials. Also, many people of Ethiopian extraction who grew up in Israel are starting to write their life memoirs and their family histories, and these books provide additional information on their Judaism and customs. For example: Was there a *mehitzah* (partition) in the synagogue between men and women? What did they do if Yom Kippur fell out on a Sabbath? What is the *karet* punishment? Did they blow the *shofar* (ram’s horn) in Ethiopia? Did Jews sanctify occasions [such as the Sabbath, holidays, and more] using wine? In what ways are the holy texts that Ethiopian Jews hold different, or similar, to Ethiopian Christian texts and rabbinic texts? Matters of marriage, purity, the Ethiopian-Jewish calendar, and many other topics. This year the University of Gondar announced the establishment of a center for the study of Ethiopian Jewry, and we met with researchers who already have important findings regarding Jewish life in the Gondar area. Recently, Rabbi Reuven Tal Yaso, a researcher and member of the Ethiopian community, found a rare manuscript of the Bible in the Tigray region. According to Yaso, this manuscript that he found in northern Ethiopia is an ancient one, predating all the Ethiopian manuscripts that were available, up to now, to the scholarly community. It also looks ancient, even more than the collection of Hebrew manuscripts that we have today. Yaso claims that most of the manuscripts extant today are later manuscripts that include both changes and errors (reference to Yaso here). Below is one example among many, from the book of Psalms, chapter 2.

**Psalms Chapter 2**

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| Hebrew version | Asmara manuscript (Yaso) | Dillman edition |
| 1 Why do nations assemble, and peoples plot vain things;  kings of the earth take their stand, 2 and regents intrigue together against the Lord and against His anointed?  3 “Let us break the cords of their yoke, shake off their ropes from us!”  4 He who is enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord mocks at them.  5 Then He speaks to them in anger, terrifying them in His rage,  6 “But I have installed My king on Zion, My holy mountain!”  7 Let me tell of the decree: the Lord said to me, “You are My son, I have fathered you this day.  8 Ask it of Me, and I will make the nations your domain; your estate, the limits of the earth.  9 You can smash them with an iron mace, shatter them like potter’s ware.”  10 So now, O kings, be prudent; accept discipline, you rulers of the earth!  11 Serve the Lord in awe; tremble with fright,  12 pay homage in good faith,lest He be angered, and your way be doomed in the mere flash of His anger. Happy are all who take refuge in Him. | 1. ለምንት አንገለጉ አሕዛብ፡   ወሕዘብኒ ነበቡ ከንቶ።   1. ወተንሥኡ ነገሥተ ምድር፡   ወመላእክትኒ ተጋብኡ ምስሌሆሙ ኅብረ፡  ላዕለ እግዚአብሔር ወላዕለ መሲሑ።   1. ንበትክ እምኔነ ማእሥሪሆሙ፡   ወንገድፍ እምላዕሌነ አርዑቶሙ።   1. ዘይነብር ውስተ ሰማይ ይስሕቆሙ፡   ወእግዚአብሔር ይሣለቅ ላዕሌሆሙ።   1. ሶበ ይነቦሙ በመዓቱ፡   ወበመዓቱ የሀውኮሙ።   1. አንሰ ተሠየምኩ ንጉሥ በላዕሌሆሙ፡   በጽዮን በደብረ መቅደሱ።   1. ከመ እንግር ትእዛዞ ለእግዚአብሔር፡   እግዚአብሔር ይቤለኒ ወልዱየ እንተ፡  ወአነ ዮም ወለድኩከ።   1. ሰአል እምነየ እሁብከ አሕዛበ ለርስትከ፡   ወምኵናኒከኒ እስከ አጽናፈ ምድር።   1. ወትርዕዮሙ በበትረ ሐፂን፡   ወከመ ንዋየ ለብሓ ትቀጠቅጦሙ።   1. ወይእዜኒ ነገሥት ለብዉ፡   ወተገሠፁ ኵልክሙ እለ ትኬንንዋ ለምድር።   1. ተቀነዩ ለእግዚአብሔር በፍርሀት፡   ወተኃሠዩ ሎቱ በረዐድ።   1. አጽንዕዋ ለጥበብ ከመ ኢይትመዐዕ እግዚአብሔር፡   ወኢትትኃጐሉ እምፍኖተ ጽድቅ፡  ሶበ ነደት ፍጡነ መዓቱ፡  ብፁዓን ኵሎሙ እለ ተወከሉ ቦቱ። | ትንቢት፡ እንበይነ፡ ክርስቶስ፡  ወጽውዐ፡ አሕዛብ፤  መዝሙር፡ ዘዳዊት።   1. ለምንት፡ አንገለጉ፡ አሕዛብ፤   ወሕዘብኒ፡ ነበቡ፡ ከንቶ።   1. ወተንሥኡ፡ ነገሥተ፡ ምድር፤   ወመላእክትኒ፡ ተጋብኡ፡ ምስሌሆሙ፡ ኅብረ፤  ላዕለ፡ እግዚአብሔር፡ ወላዕለ፡ መሲሑ።   1. ንበትክ፡ እምኔነ፡ መኣሥሪሆሙ፤   ወንገድፍ፡ እምላዕሌነ፡ አርዑቶሙ።   1. ዘይነብር፡ ውስተ፡ ሰማይ፡ ይሥሕቆሙ፤   ወእግዚአብሔር፡ ይሳለቅ፡ ላዕሌሆሙ።   1. ሶበ፡ ይነቦሙ፡ በመዐቱ፤   ወበመዐቱ፡ የሀውኮሙ።   1. ወአንሰ፡ ተሠየምኩ፡ ንጉሥ፡ በላዕሌሆሙ፤   በጽዮን፡ በደብረ፡ መቅደሱ።   1. ከመ፡ እንግር፡ ትእዛዞ፡ ለእግዚአብሔር፡   እግዚአብሔር፡ ይቤለኒ፡ ወልዱየ፡ እንተ፤  ወአነ፡ ዮም፡ ወለድኩከ።   1. ሰአል፡ እምነየ፡ ወእሁብከ፡ አሕዛበ፡ ለርስትከ፤   ወምኵናኒከኒ፡ እስከ፡ አጽናፈ፡ ምድር።   1. ወትሬዕዮሙ፡ በበትረ፡ ኀጺን፤   ወከመ፡ ንዋየ፡ ለብሓ፡ ትቀጠቅጦሙ።   1. ወይእዜኒ፡ ነገሥት፡ ለብዉ፤   ወተገሠጹ፡ ኵልክሙ፡ እለ፡ ትኬንንዋ፡ ለምድር።   1. ተቀነዩ፡ ለእግዚአብሔር፡ በፍርሀት፤   ወተሐሠዩ፡ ሎቱ፡ በረዐድ።   1. አጽንዕዋ፡ ለጥበብ፡ ከመ፡ ኢይትመዓዕ፡ እግዚአብሔር፡   ወኢትትሐጐሉ፡ እምፍኖተ፡ ጽድቅ፡  ሶበ፡ ነደት፡ ፍጡነ፡ መዐቱ፤  ብፁዓን፡ ኵሎሙ፡ እለ፡ ተወከሉ፡ ቦቱ። |

We have three versions here. The column on the left is an English translation of the Masoretic text. The middle column is from the Yaso manuscript, recently discovered in Asmara (in the Tigray district), in northern Ethiopia. The column on the right is from the more common Dillman manuscript, which is used by scholars and Ethiopian Jews. This comparison between the three manuscripts allows us to immediately observe the differences between them, both inתנועות and in content (the differences are marked in red). For example, we can see the addition at the beginning of the Psalm in the Dillman manuscript: ትንቢት፡ እንበይነ፡ ክርስቶስ፡ ወጽውዐ፡ አሕዛብ፤ መዝሙር፡ ዘዳዊት። (“Christ” [Jesus] and “A psalm of David”). This addition does not appear in either the Hebrew version or in Yaso’s version. The Asmara (Yaso) manuscript version does not have these additions.

Another example of differences appears in verse 6, “But I have installed My king on Zion, My holy mountain” (the Hebrew version lacks a few words here that connect the reader to the Ethiopian versions): አንሰ ተሠየምኩ ንጉሥ በላዕሌሆሙ፡ በጽዮን በደብረ መቅደሱ። (in the Asmara-Yaso version), and ወአንሰ፡ ተሠየምኩ፡ ንጉሥ፡ በላዕሌሆሙ፤ በጽዮን፡ በደብረ፡ መቅደሱ። (in the Dillman version). The beginning of the verse (in the Hebrew and Dillman versions) already raises the question: Who is the subject in the verse? God or David? According to the Hebrew version, it seems that the subject is King David. As R. Isaiah di Trani explains: “Then He speaks to them – the Creator, in his anger. And what does he say to them? I have installed My king – I have installed David to be My king over Zion – and you convene to displace him!? In wonder” (Isaiah di Trani, commenting on Ps 2:6). Meaning, the one who reigns over the Mount of Zion is King David. According to the Yaso edition, the subject is God: It is God who reigns, not King David. “I have installed my reign from over you and reign in Zion in the Temple.” According to Yaso, the version used by those who study Ethiopian Jewry, as well as by Ethiopian Jews, and perhaps even the Hebrew version, are later versions that include changes and additions that were probably influenced by various parts of the Christian world.

**Here are two more examples.**

One example of a difference between the Ethiopian version (the Orit, in the Ge’ez language) and the rabbinic tradition (the Torah, in Hebrew) relates to the prohibition against eating meat and milk together. Was this allowed in Ethiopia, or did they only allow eating chicken and milk? The Torah states: “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk” (Ex 23:19). This prohibition repeats three times in the Torah, in the same format. As opposed to this, in the Ethiopian translation of the “Orit” the translator writes: ወኢታብስል ፡ ጣዕዋ ፡ በሐሊበ ፡ እሙ ።. We see that the translation differs from the rabbinic source. Indeed, it is permitted to eat roasted meat with butter and chicken with milk in Ethiopia, with no restrictions. The scientific version will supply a research-based explanation for these differences.

A second example is circumcision in Ethiopia. One example of the differences between the various traditions held by Ethiopian Jews is whether circumcision takes place on the eighth day or on the seventh day. And – did they also circumcise women (Gen 17:12)? This seems to be a simple matter, as in the Orit it says “every male among you shall be circumcised at the age of eight days,” ወለሕፃን ፡ ትገዝሩ ፡ በሳ[ምን]ት ፡ ዕለት ፡ ወኵሎ ፡ ተባዕተክሙ. According to this, only boys are circumcised, and on the eighth day. However, it is not so simple. Jews who lived in the Tigray region attested to circumcisions taking place on the seventh day. The ceremony took place in the afternoon so that the *mohelet* (the woman performing the circumcision) could still immerse herself after the ceremony and return to the village before sundown and would not have to wait for a long time until sundown. In contrast, Jews who lived in the Amhara region attested to circumcisions taking place on the eighth day. What is the reason for this? Furthermore, external sources (such as travelers and researchers) also differ on the question of which day circumcision takes place. In his book on the law and customs in Habash Jewry, Eshkoli claims that males are circumcised on the seventh day after birth. By contrast, Faitlovitch says that circumcision takes place on the eighth day. According to him, circumcision is performed on the seventh day only in cases when it would otherwise take place on the Sabbath. Leslau confirms this, as does Flad, one of the leading missionaries in 19th-century Habash. The latter adds that circumcision is performed on the eighth day by three elderly women, but not on the Sabbath. Joseph Halevi notes that circumcision takes place on the seventh day. This is just one of many examples that point to the potential to be gained from comparing the versions. This proves the value of investing in a study that will systematically compare them.

Anticipated results and obstacles: Regarding the results, as noted, the goal of this project is to publish a synoptic edition that will compare different versions and, based on this comparison, offer insights. This requires serious and responsible work, and I will undoubtedly encounter many difficulties, such as accessing new materials and locating Christian interviewees who are still alive both in Israel and in Ethiopia who were familiar with the Jewish villages.

**C.4. Resources Available for the Study**

The collaborating scholars and cooperating agents:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Name | Field of expertise | Academic affiliation |
| A researcher from Ethiopia | History |  |
| Prof. Avi Sagi | Continental philosophy; Phenomenology and existentialism; Hermeneutics; Relations between religion and ethics; Political thought; Modern Jewish philosophy; Philosophy of halakhah; Critical theory. | Professor emeritus in the Department of Philosophy, Bar Ilan University; and research fellow in the Kogod Research Center for Contemporary Jewish Thought, Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem. Winner of the Bialik prize, 2022. |
| Prof. Ephraim Isaac | A historian and linguist who specializes in Afro-Asiatic languages and Ethiopian history. | An American Jew of Ethiopian extraction. A professor at Princeton University, and previously, at Harvard University. |
| Prof. Dan Siman | Anthropologist, the ethnography of Ethiopian Jews to the study of texts on Maimonides and Hassidism during the Holocaust period. | The co-chairman of the Emory Forum for the Ethnographic Study of Religion. Co-editor of a series of books on the modern anthropology of religion in Palgrave Macmillan, the Prooftexts board, and the new journal for open approach essential studies. He promotes a truly interdisciplinary approach to the ethnographical and textual study of religion. |
| Rabbi Reuven Tal Yaso | Expert in the Ge’ez language and specializing in the tradition of Ethiopian Jews | Deals with the translation of Ge’ez, serves as a rabbi of the Ethiopian community, and carries out learning expeditions in Ethiopia. |
| A researcher from Ethiopia | Religion |  |
| A researcher from Ethiopia | Sociology |  |
| Sharon Shalom | Jewish philosophy, Ethiopian halakhah and thought | Ono Academic College: Ethiopian Jewry, The philosophy of halakhah, Exegesis and culture, Rabbinics. |

1. “*Beit Yisrael*” is the name by which Ethiopian Jews referred to themselves for generations. Today, we also refer to this community as “Ethiopian Jews.” In this book, the names *Falashim*, *Beit Yisrael*, and Ethiopian Jews are used to describe the same group of people (Eshkoli 1973; Weil 1997). I will henceforth primarily employ the name *Beit Yisrael*, but I will also sometimes use the other names. Furthermore, almost all the sources that I found append the letter *aleph* at the end of the first word, rendering it *Beta Yisrael*, though Yaso (2020) has it as *Beit Yisrael*. I asked him why he chose this spelling, and he explained by referring to the verse: “God, whose ways I have followed, will send…” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Shalom (2022), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See: Shoshana Ben Dor and Steven Kaplan (eds.), *Yehudei Etiopia – bibliografia mueret*. Ben Zvi Institute for the Study of Eastern Jewry: Jerusalem, 1988. Also see: Hagar Salamon and Steve Kaplan (eds.), *Yehudei Etiopia – bibliografia mueret bet, 1988-1998*. Ben Zvi Institute for the Study of Eastern Jewry: Jerusalem 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Sagi (2017), 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Even today, Israeli society generally perceives Ethiopian Jews to be Jewish thanks to Rav Ovadiah Yosef, and not to the Jews to moved to Israel; which is absurd. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Sagi, N., *Kehilot Yisrael shene’elmu, Yehudiut beAfrika ekev tauyot bezihuyim geografiim*. *Reshit – Iyunim beYahadut*, Shalom Hartman, 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Bruce, J., *Travels to Discover the Sources of the Nile*, 2nd ed. Edinburgh: 1805 (James Bruce’s journey to Ethiopia and the end of the 18th century, including many mentions of the *Falasha*); see also Halevi, Y., “*Masa’o beHabash legiluy haFalashim*,” *Peamim* 58 (1994), 5-66 (this is the complete report of Halevi’s journey to Ethiopian Jews, with comments by Prof. Steven Kaplan); Weil, S., *Emunot uminhagim shel Yehudei Etiopia beYisrael*, 1989; Weil, S., *Yehudei Etiopia bemaavar bein tarbuti*, 1994; Waldman, *Me’ever lenaharei Kush*, 1989; Corinaldi, *Yahadut Etiopia – zehut umasoret*, 1989; Shlush, *Nidhei Yisrael yekhanes al Yehudei Habash*, 1988; Bodovsky, D., *Sugiyot benosei mishpahah shel Yehudei Etiopia*, 1992; Shabtai, *Hakhi-akhi – masa hazehut shel hayalim olim meEtiopia*, 2005; Kaplan, S., *The Beta-Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia: From Earliest Times to the Twentieth Century*, New York University Press, 1992; Ben Ezer, *Kemo or bakad*, 1992; Eskholi*, Sefer haFalashim*, 1973; Eshkoli*,* זתרצ"ו, 31-134; Leslau, W., *Falasha Anthology VI*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951 (discussion of the sanctified texts of *Beta Yisrael* with an introduction regarding customs and beliefs). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Blidstein, Y., *Raayon Torah shebaal peh vetoldotav be’igeret Rav Shrira Gaon*, *Daat* 4 (1980), 6-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Etiopia – Natzrut, Islam, Yahadut* (2003), 25. The Jewish impact during the period before Christianity arrived also yielded a large number of words and basic terms in Ge’ez. See also: Greenfeld, *Masorot hatefilot Yehudei Etiopia* (2001), 61-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kaplan, S., *Al hatemurot beheker Yahadut Etiopia* (1994), 137-146. Note that this is not at all different from any other Jewish group in any other place. Clearly, if we want to truly understand the cultural and spiritual lifestyles of any community, we must first learn and understand the background from which it comes. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The available findings that will help examine this question will probably not conclusively solve the ethnic origin question. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Scholars in this group include Jacques Faitlovitch, Yosef Halevi, James Bruce, Henry Stern, Samuel Gobat, Aharon Eshkoli, the rabbinic trandtion, and others. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Kaplan (1985), 17. See also Kaplan (1988). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Scholars in this group include Antoine d'Abbadie, Wolf Leslau, Steven Kaplan, and Edward Olendorf. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Valdman, M., *Yehudei Etiopia umorashtam: Hikrei halakhah.* Jerusalem: Dabri Shir, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/health/2012-08-07 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Etiopia, Natzrut, Islam*, *Yahadut* (2003), 265. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Kaplan, S. *Leheker toledot Beit Yisrael beheksher haYehudi-Notzri beEtiopia*. *Peamim* 22 (1985), 16-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Valdman, M. *Yehudei Etiopia umorashtam: Hikrei halakhah*. Jerusalem: Dabri Shir, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Despite the fact that most of these studies deal with their religious culture in disciplines that belong to the social sciences. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Shalom (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For more on this see Sagi (2006), 181-246. See also Said (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Sagi (2019), 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Here is a short list of the studies: Weil, S., *Emunot uminhagim shel yehudei Etiopia beYisrael*, 1989; Weil, S., *Yehudei Etiopia bemaavar bein tarbuti*, 1994; Valdman, M., *Me’ever lenaharei Kush*, Tel Aviv: 1989; Corinaldi, M., 1989: Shlush, D., *Nidhei Yisrael yakhnes al yehudei Habash*, 1988; Shabtai, M., *Hakhi akhi – masa hazehut shel hayalim olim meEtiopia*, Tel Aviv: 2005; Shabtai, M., *Bein regei lerap*, Tel Aviv, 2001; Ben Azar, G., *Kemo or bakad*, 1992; University Press, 1951; (a discussion of *Beta Yisrael*’s holy texts with an introduction that relates to customs and beliefs); Leslau, W., *Falasha Anthology*, VI. New Haven: Yale. Kay Kaufman Shelemay, *Music, Ritual, and Falasha History*, Michigan State University Press, 1986; Kay Kaufman Shelemay and Peter Jeffrey (eds.), *Ethiopian Christian Liturgical Chant: An Anthology*, 3 vols. Madison: 1993-1997, “The Ethiopian Jews,” in Ron Atar, *The Function of Musical Instruments in the Litury o the Jews of Ethiopia*; Stoffergen-Pederson, K., *Les Ethiopiens*, Tournhout, 1990; *Birth of an Elite*, Routledge, 2005, that presents a survey that includes discussions of history, sacred art, and the Ethiopian Orthodox doctrine, as well as a broad anthology of Christian literature; Salamon, H., *The Hyena People: Ethiopian Jews in Christian Ethiopia*, California Press, 1999; Shalom, S., *Minhagei brit hamilah etzel “Beta Yisrael”* (Master’s thesis, Prof. D. Sperber advisor, Bar Ilan University); Ziv, Y., *Tuma veyaharah etzel hakehilah haEtiopit* (Master’s thesis, Prof. D. Sperber advisor, Bar Ilan University). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Kaplan (1997), 23 (emphasis in the original). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Kaplan, S., *Motzaam shel “Beta Yisrael”: Hamesh azharot metodologiyot*, *Peamim* 33 (ed. Yitzhak Betzalel). Jerusalem: 1988, 33-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Kahen* (in Ge’ez: ካሀን) is the primary religious authority in *Beit Yisrael*. The *liqa kahenat* (in Ge’ez: ሊቀ ካሀንት, high priest; plural: *liqanä kahhənat*, ሊቃነ ካህናት) is a priest who holds supreme religious authority over a wide area. According to my grandfather, Abba Djan Gidon Mangasha, in the distant past the honorific “Qes” was not used for the spiritual leader in the *Beit Yisrael* community, but rather, the term *Kahen* or *Debterah*. I this book I decided to use the word *kahen*. **שמגלה** (in Ge’ez: ሽማግሌ; in plural, Amharic: **שמגלוץ'**, Ge’ez and Tigris: **שמגלתת**) is an Ethiopian term that means adult, senior and elder. The **שמגלוץ'** has many roles, see Shalom 2012. These interviews provided an extraordinary golden opportunity. Most of the oral tradition that is held by the sages of the Ethiopian community are in Israel, but are not exposed. Remember that these elders and sages will not live forever. The interviewing process itself has ethnological importance. There is a great and important treasury of knowledge, and the elders of the community should be interviewed and documented in order to preserve this knowledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Several years ago, I attended an international conference in Gondar, Ethiopia. After the conference, I decided to visit two other cities – Lalibela and Aksum – as well as several villages where Jews resided, in the Tigray and Gondar regions. These places are a treasury for many reasons, and comprehensive research there will afford unheard-of innovations to the field of research on Ethiopia. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. The International center for the study of Ethiopian Jewry, Ono Academic College, Zalman Shazar Center, E'eleh BeTamar association. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Finding and recruiting the interviewees will be done professionally. The interviewees will probably be from the first generation. The interviews will be documented on film. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)