**The Journey of the Ethiopian Oriyt**

They are known as Beta Israel - one of the lost tribes who, for centuries had a dream to return to the promised land. The conditions in Ethiopia were becoming more and more difficult. Famine, political unrest and religious intolerance was making their life almost impossible. The dream began to be realized in the 1970’s and then dramatically accelerated in the 80’s and 90’s.

One of these dramatic events was a seven-week clandestine operation by the Israeli Government to bring them ‘home’. First, they had to make their way to the Sudanese border…many traveling by foot and risking injury, starvation and violence along the way. Then they were kept in refugee camps with harsh conditions where many became ill or died. And finally, they were airlifted, many children without their families, confused and unsure, brought from the desert to the modern land of Israel.

I imagine a little girl. I call her Liya.

She awoke in the dead of night. Her mother was gently shaking her, get up my love get up. We need to go now. She was tired and confused but she was a good girl and she did what she was told. The bags were ready, she put on some clothes, her mother made her wear more layers than usual. And they left.

I wonder what were in those bags?

What do you take when you are forced to leave your home?

When the chance of perishing along the way is no worse than the reality of staying where you are.

When the fear that there will be nothing at the other end of the journey, or that you won’t survive it, is no worse than the fear of waking up in your home and not knowing if you’ll live through the day.

I remember my own experience of having to leave my home. The day of the big fire. At first I thought it was a neighbor, burning some leaves. But the smell was so strong it became hard to breathe, even with the windows closed. When I opened the front door, there was a wall of heat. I ran to the car and escaped through the burning neighborhood. What did I take with me?

Later, I thought about it, nothing mattered to me in that moment - just my loved ones. And getting out before the house burnt down.

I see Liya’s father, the head of the Beta Israel community. The leader of prayer and the keeper of the sacred text, the Oriyt. This text, written in the Ge’ez language, was used by the Ethiopian Communities throughout the region. It contained the five books of Moses and well as the books of Joshua, Judges and Ruth. When he packed those bags, he did not forget this beautiful, centuries old artifact. He wrapped it in a brightly covered fabric and carried it the entire way.

They walked for days and nights. It was too hot and too cold….They had joined others for this journey and they lost many along the way. One day, it was particularly hot and at one stage on the road, her mother said to Liya: close your eyes, don’t look beautiful girl, don’t look. She did what she was told. And walked on, head high, not seeing the images that I imagine. She kept walking, eyes closed, holding her father’s hand, his other hand holding the precious book.

Operation Moses rescued 8,000 Ethiopian Jews and brought them to Israel. There were more than 30 flights that brought 200 people at a time. With them came the most beautiful text of their heritage: the Oriyt. In early 1985 news of this covert Operation was leaked to the media and as a result it because too dangerous to continue. The rest of the Ethiopian Jewish community would have to wait almost a decade before they would make it ‘home’. The Oriyt, made it to the National Library of Israel some years later. There was a festive ceremony to celebrate the presentation of the Oriyt, during which one of the community leaders read from it - maybe just like Liya’s father read from it during the arduous journey from Ethiopia through Sudan and finally to Israel.

What would you take if you had to leave your home?
If war and famine, intolerance and hatred drove you away.

What would you hold so precious that you would carry it forever?

Perhaps it is that which preserves identity, heritage or faith that’s worth carrying - so that it serves as a witness, to tell of the lives of these people, to tell their story.