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April 8, 2025

Weaving Two Worlds: The Next Generations of Ethiopian Jewry in Israel

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Abstract

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The next generations of Ethiopian Jews, more formally known as Beta Israel, have been the subject of limited scholarly literature, leaving significant gaps in understanding their evolving identities, cultural preservation, and integration within Israeli society. The next generations of Ethiopian Jewry in Israel are born into much different lives than their parents. Big cities are dominated by people of lighter skin, a diversity of cultures, languages, and understandings of the world. This all takes place in the first and only Jewish State in the world, which thousands of Beta Israel immigrated to from Ethiopia in the late 1980s and early 1990s. How do the next generations of this community make meaning of their identities in Israel? What does the preservation of traditional Beta Israel culture look like today?

This ethnography was conducted through participant observation and unstructured interviews within multiple spheres of the Beta Israel community, from restaurants and organizations that preserve culture, to homes and weddings. The next generations of Beta Israel in Israel hold a liminal position in Israeli society: at once trying to integrate into Israeli culture while striving to preserve their Ethiopian culture. This leads to a reshaping of both the Beta Israel community and the Israeli society as a whole. The primary questions explored in this ethnography are as follows:

How do systematic epistemologies of power in Israel continue to oppress the Beta Israel community? In the same light, how do these epistemologies under Israel's hegemony shape how this community, specifically the next generations, perceive their Ethiopian culture and identity?

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The Beginning

“Love makes your soul crawl out from its hiding place.” Zora Neale Hurston

I walked into a parking lot where I saw people congregating in the distance. This is where the party is? I was very confused. As we got closer, I saw a group of around fifteen people, men and women alike, all seemingly Ethiopian, sitting around a long, fold-out table at the end of the parking lot, drinking, smoking, and talking. It was Shabbat, the day of rest for the Jewish people, in which electronics and smoking are forbidden, so I assumed these people were all secular Jews. It was all young people, around my age, and one elderly man. I walked up and was introduced to the group in Hebrew: “This is Kae, she’s an American Jew and she’s here volunteering in the Ethiopian Jewish community.” All faces immediately turned towards me with wonder and interest. I smiled, feeling myself blush, waving and going around to shake each person's hand as my friend does.

As I went around meeting all of them, in no way even remotely remembering their names, I realized that a few of the women at one end of the table did not have phones and were wearing modest clothing, presumably identifying them as religious. One of the seemingly secular women, wearing a small tube top and jeans, said in Hebrew, “Let’s take a shot everyone!” Everyone took a shot except those girls. Although I tried to leave the biased thoughts behind, my subjectivity showed itself, and in my head, I thought, “The religious people are so strict. They never have any fun.”

Based on the connections I had in the previous months and years with people my age in the Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel, I did not consider the large number of young adults

who are religious in the community. It is important to note how that takes shape and form in a Jewish country largely created by Ashkenazi (of Eastern European descent) Jews. Throughout the ethnography, it will be evident that the religious Ethiopian Jews had some of the largest impact on my work and my life that summer.

All of the people at the table (aside from the elderly man) were first cousins, ages ranging from twenty-two to thirty-five. Everyone was there to celebrate one cousin's birthday and another cousin's new engagement. The elderly man, who looked incredibly out of place, turned out to be the father of some of the people there. He went back into the building next to the parking lot where his house was, and an older woman, whom I find out later to be his wife, appeared with *dabo*, traditional Ethiopian bread. It was warm, large, circular, and fluffy. She began handing it out to everyone, and I happily took a piece. It was delicious. The woman smiled at me warmly, making the *dabo* suddenly taste even sweeter than before. The girl next to me told me a phrase in Amharic, urging me to tell the woman how much I enjoy the *dabo* in Amharic. I got up a few minutes later and gave her a hug, telling her how delicious the *dabo* was. She laughed, as hugging over *dabo* is not a normal occurrence, but I was feeling overwhelmed with gratitude. We sat together and talked at the end of the table, as I struggled to speak the little Hebrew I knew at the time and struggled to understand her Hebrew because of her Ethiopian accent, which I was not yet used to. She immediately offered me *injera*, Ethiopian cuisine, which I declined, as I had just had Shabbat dinner with a different family. We talked a bit about her history and her move to Israel, but not in great detail. She is from a mountainous region called Quara and her family traveled to Israel in 2001. She came with her five children and the youngest was born in Israel. I told her that she is a very strong woman and that I admire her immensely. She seemed almost shocked that a random girl from the U.S. whom she had met just

a few minutes ago would give such a compliment, and I suppose so was I. We looked at each other smiling for some time, letting our eyes do the talking. That first day that I met this woman, I knew she was a very special woman, with a big heart and a life and history I could never understand.

Later in the evening, one of the religious girls motioned me over to come sit with them. I had had a few drinks and happily complied, leaving my biases behind. I told them about my life as they asked: about my background, University, what I will be doing in Israel and how I got to this party. They thought I was Ethiopian, which led me to explain my family background. I answered all the questions and we laughed frequently, as my Hebrew was not so good at the time. Because it was Shabbat, none of the girls had phones, and it was very easy to feel the sense of true presence in the conversation. I suppose this was the first moment I began to feel a connection to Shabbat that I had never felt before. There, in this random parking lot, in this random town outside of Tel Aviv, with these random people.

I was sitting next to one of the religious girls, who was in a beautiful dress, covering up to her wrists and ankles, a very delicate pattern, and ruffles at the collar. Her name is Rivka, and she lives in the building of one of the cousins. She was one of the few people at this gathering not related by blood. We began talking, and after many minutes went by, she said very quietly “it’s my birthday.” I replied excitedly, “Today?!” “Yes, but it’s not a big deal.” I was in utter shock, as we were at a party and no one had mentioned it, and it seemed she was almost embarrassed by the thought. I said, “We must do something to celebrate! This is a big deal. It only comes once a year.” She replied, “All I want for my birthday is a husband and children. Just pray that I will get that.” I was completely taken aback. Birthdays for many are means for celebrating and excitement. After all, we were at a birthday party that night! I asked the other

girls if they were planning anything, and they said that they would probably go out to dinner. I asked her again what she wanted to do, to which she answered, “I want to go to the Kotel and pray.” I tucked this answer in the back of my mind, doubtful that it would be I that would go with her.

Everyone besides the religious women left and went to a club, and we cleaned up the party. Afterwards, I sat with them and talked about religion. I asked them many questions about the synagogue specifically for Ethiopian Jews that was just across the parking lot, to which they invited me to attend. I asked them what Judaism means to them and how it has shaped their lives and about the leaders of the Ethiopian Jewish community. Ethiopian clubs are something I enjoy, but for some reason, I stayed there and spoke with them. It felt as if a force from the universe pulled me in to stay. And for this reason, whatever it was, two of the girls, Rivka and Selam, became my best friends.

Historical Overview, Literature Review, and Methodology

History

The history of the Ethiopian Jewish community, more formally known as Beta Israel, is far from simple. Much remains unknown regarding the origins of Beta Israel in Ethiopia. While many historians and scholars have contemplated the origins of the Beta Israel and their lives in Ethiopia (Seeman 2009; Kaplan 1992; Feldman 2012; Quirin 2010), my ethnographic analysis of Ethiopian Jews will draw primarily from the members of the community itself, even if they are not traditionally understood as scholars. The autobiographical accounts of Ethiopian Jews are imperative to the understanding of their lived experience, as it is *theirs* and not that of Western academia. Therefore, for the foundation of this historical overview, I will analyze the history utilizing people not considered ‘scholars’ but who are more knowledgeable about the experience of the Beta Israel because they *lived* it. Nothing can compare to the insight produced through lived experience. The following historical summarization will be completed with the help of autobiographies of Ethiopian Jews (Tegegne 2008; Abebe 2021; Avraham 1986).

Baruch’s Odyssey, an autobiography detailing the life of Baruch Tegegne in Ethiopia, throughout the immigration, and in Israel, provides three possible narratives that are common explanations to the question of origin of the Beta Israel: that the Beta Israel came to Ethiopia during the period of King Solomon and Queen Sheba, that they walked down the Nile River after the destruction of the First Temple, or that they were refugees from the Romans after the destruction of the Second Temple (Tegegne 2008, 1). I learned that the Rabbinate considers them to be from the lost tribe of Dan. Extensive time has been spent by Rabbis and scholars alike, contemplating the origins of the Beta Israel. In the words of Professor Don Seeman, “I want to

shift the conversation about Beta Israel away from the perplexing question of origins, with its immediate and perhaps inevitable leakage into the bureaucratic question of ‘true identity,’ and toward a greater appreciation of contingency in the history of the present” (Seeman 2009, 61). The foundation of this ethnography illuminates the feelings of Beta Israel itself. The past is imperative to a holistic understanding of a people and proves important to the people of this community. At the same time, the most essential time is the present, in which the Beta Israel community has flourished in Israel, reaching over 170,000 people in the one Jewish country in the world.

Despite an unclear origin, the Beta Israel community had found its home and practiced strict Judaism for centuries, largely in Northern Ethiopia, specifically the regions of Gondar and Tigray. Although there were quite a few Ethiopian Jews in other cities such as Addis Ababa (the capital of Ethiopia), most of the community lived in small villages in the North centered around agriculture. Male occupations were most commonly blacksmiths and herders, with women tending to their children, raising and teaching them. Quite a few elders in the community have told me with a nostalgic voice and glossy eyes that, “Life in Ethiopia was simple, a life of Judaism and agriculture.” Many recall the life there as children with a fond joy, something of a utopia out of grasp, a dream.

The villages were isolated with the goal of protecting their Judaism from unfriendly neighbors, the Ethiopian government, and missionaries. There are dozens of records of missionaries coming into Jewish villages and harassing Jews, even on Shabbat (Tegegne 2008, 19). Most Jews could not own land under the rule of an emperor in the fifteenth century, who proposed that all non-Christians are *Falashas*, the Amharic word for outsiders. “Falasha is therefore associated with anti-Semitism and verbal abuse, but it essentially referred to the

‘dishonorable’ state of landlessness manifested in the denial of the right of the Beta Israel both to own land, and to belong to the land, in Ethiopia” (Gondar’s Child 2012, 40). Although *Falasha* can still be heard among many non-Jewish Ethiopians today, it is considered a pejorative term (Seeman 2009). Another name for a person of Ethiopian descent that is respectful is *habesha*, which I will use interchangeably with Ethiopian throughout the ethnography.

Such anti-Semitism was not felt by all of the community, with some villages having close and even familial relations to their Christian and Muslim neighbors. Danny Abebe, in his autobiography, tells how Christian and Muslim neighbors came over often to socialize, but they did not come on Shabbat out of respect (Abebe 2021, 40). Additionally, during ceremonies such as weddings and festivals, they would also come and eat separately from the Jews. This perspective is one of respect and cooperation between the different religions, one that was not always visible.

The centuries of Ethiopian Jewry before the *aliyot* to Israel were not monolithic. Each region, community, and individual had their own lived experiences, shaping their perceptions and understandings of Ethiopia and their histories, some with great awe and some with pain and grief. Yet the *aliyot* to Israel brought both of these emotions onto the entirety of the community. The two main *aliyot* to Israel, Operation Moses (1984) and Operation Solomon (1991), were the largest immigrations of Ethiopian Jewry to Israel, changing the shape of the lives in the community forever. Some Beta Israel made it to Israel in earlier years through different means, such as connections to Jacques Faitlovitch, a Polish Jew who is known as one of the first Jews of the ‘West’ to go to Ethiopia and interact with the Beta Israel community in the early 1900s, while the large majority were still in Ethiopia, waiting for their return to Jerusalem. The *aliyot*

are often seen by outsiders as one and the same, but they contain very different journeys, experiences, and destinies for the people involved.

Jacques Faitlovitch is an important figure in the immersion of Beta Israel into the Jewry known to the rest of the world, from which the Beta Israel were cut off because of their isolation (Tegegne 2008). The community had thought for centuries that they were the last Jews left, later for them to find out that Jewry was not only alive in almost every continent, it had also taken on new meanings. Rabbinic interpretations and teachings such as the Talmud added new and multi-faceted layers to what Judaism is and means. Because of this, Ethiopian Jews did not celebrate Jewish holidays known to the rest of the world, such as Hanukkah and Purim, which were not explicitly stated in the Torah, considering the Torah was all they had. After his first visit in 1904, Faitlovitch spent time in Ethiopia and began to understand the vast differences of their Judaism. He began to open Jewish schools and teach people Hebrew and Judaism known to the rest of the world, with the establishment of the first Jewish school in Ethiopia in 1924 (Avraham 1986, 11). This helped prepare the community for the aliyot ahead.

Operation Moses was the first large-scale operation, taking place in Sudan. The walk from Ethiopia to Sudan was difficult for many, with little food and water, threats from both the Ethiopian and Sudanese governments and burglars. Many elderly women told me stories of carrying children in their arms, on their backs, and in their stomachs on the way. The ones that made the long journey were placed in refugee camps in Sudan with horrible conditions. Danny Abebe tells of his experience at Um Raquba refugee camp, where he “awoke to a post-apocalyptic dystopia: an expanse of children with swollen bellies and oversized heads, orbited by legions of flies. The acrid stench of death wafted from every direction” (Abebe 2021, 69). From my research, everyone in the community knows someone who died in Operation Moses. Abebe

similarly notes that every family in Operation Moses has members that did not make it (Abebe 2021, 75). Yet despite the immense grief and pain endured on this journey, the Israeli Mossad airlifted around 8,000 Ethiopian Jews to Israel. The Beta Israel community in Israel nearly doubled after this operation took place, scoring a huge victory for the State and the community.

Operation Solomon came almost a decade later, when about 14,000 Beta Israel were airlifted from Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. It was distinct from that of the latter, being that they did not have to trek across borders and live in refugee camps. It was a much smoother operation for both the community and the Mossad, perhaps explaining one of the reasons that it was easier for the people to integrate into Israeli society (Abebe 2021, 75). A second reason being that the families from Operation Moses paved the way for those of the latter migration.

The intense struggles of this immigration and the willingness for such a change in their livelihood can be credited to, “the fulfillment of a messianic dream” (Tegegne 2008, 197). The community prayed for centuries for the day they could return to Jerusalem, and the time had finally come. An interlocutor explained to me, “even though we lost people, we fulfilled our dream. They did not die in vain.” Little did they know that institutional and societal levels of exclusion would make them question their identity to this day.

There is much to be said about the integration process in Israel, the treatment of the community upon arriving, racism by police targeting black people, systematic conversions, and the Blood Affair of 1996 to name a few examples. There is also a noteworthy dynamic regarding the Beta Israel and Mizrahi Jews, who immigrated from the MENA¹ region in the late 1940s

¹ MENA stands for the Middle East and North Africa; the largest Jewish ethnic group is the Mizrachim. These are Jews that immigrated from the MENA region, largely that of Yemen, Morocco, and Iraq.

and 1950s, evidently before the aliyot of Beta Israel. Mizrahi Jews faced the brunt of racism in Israel as their culture and livelihoods were different from the Ashkenazi Jews. It is worth noting that Mizrahi Jews formed the Israeli Black Panther Party in the 1970s, taking inspiration from African Americans in the U.S. to fight discrimination in Israel. The arrival of Beta Israel led to a shift in perceptions and dynamics in Israeli society and profoundly shifted interethnic understandings.

The traditional job of the anthropologist is to explore and learn about the lived experience of people usually outside of the ‘West’ and, “to understand societies encountered by an expanding West, societies that seem to represent forms of social organization quite different from the West’s own capitalist and market-based ones” (Crehan 2002, 3). The Beta Israel did just the opposite, immigrating themselves into one of the only ‘developed’ countries in the world, a world that was completely different from the villages in Ethiopia. Unlike the anthropologist with the tools and resources to embark on a *temporary* journey, the Beta Israel went to Israel and were met with the unexpected: cars roaring down highways on Shabbat, restaurants lining cities, and gas stations in the place of nature. “Salamon has argued that the Beta Israel encounter with Israeli society has been a fundamental confrontation between what she calls “two different and basically opposed models of thinking: the Western idea of the constancy of objects, and the Ethiopian transformative model” (1999, 122)” (Seeman 2009, 76). They had to learn this whole new world where they were not always accepted as themselves.

Literature Review

My analysis is informed by the works of key anthropologists in the field, along with autobiographical work published by Ethiopian Jews. My goal of creating a more nuanced

understanding of Ethiopian Jewry in Israel through an ethnographic lens is a task that undoubtedly benefits from an examination of definitions and concepts that have and continue to guide anthropology to a more just and open-minded field. The foundation and continuation of anthropology flourishes with the knowledge of a wide variety of scholars and ideas, from which I have chosen a couple to further the claims made within the ethnography.

Anthropologist Tim Ingold in his narrative *Anthropology: Why It Matters*, defines anthropology not as a dusty definition relegated to the academy, nor as the aggregation of anthropological texts, but as “the philosophy within” (Ingold 2018, 4). Although an unconventional definition of anthropology, it is one that expresses the underlying beauty and possibility of the field. The love of wisdom (philosophy) and gaining wisdom by connecting and learning from others (anthropology), was my mission this past summer. Ingold presumes the job of the anthropologist is to, “to share in their (the community of study) presence, to learn from their experiments in living, and to bring this experience to bear on our own imaginings of what human life could be like, its future conditions and possibilities” (Ingold 2018, 8). Such a task is delicate, intimate, and necessary.

I propose, with the help of Ingold, a restoration of human understanding the solution to the world’s nearing end. The simple solution is, “to let others into our presence, to pay attention and to care” (Ingold 2018, 9). The quite delightful essence of anthropology can be the yearning of knowledge for the betterment of humankind. To understand why people think, believe, and dream as they do and to find human universals that can work to connect our species, a species that I suggest is the most divided of them all. To wake and call attention to the voices that often go unheard because they are “dismissed as uneducated, illiterate” (Ingold 2018, 10). The voices

that are most ignored are the voices that will lead the world in the direction of peace and humility. After volunteering and participating in fieldwork this summer, my eyes were opened to this very idea, which will be furthered throughout the ethnography.

A problem of deep concern that I faced during my time with my interlocutors was that of differentiating between friendship and study. I came to learn: to do as anthropologists do; to take field notes, to listen and observe, and to remain a quiet speckle in the background. Although the first few were accomplished, it was proven impossible to not engage in intimate dialogue with many people. Such deep conversations led to very meaningful friendships, friendships that turned into family. This blurred very quickly the lines of fieldwork and life with people whom I love. How can I in good conscience take field notes on my friends' every move, eagerly awaiting the moment in which I publish them for the world to see? It reminds me of animals in a zoo, examined and recorded, flaunted for one's own benefit. Ingold agrees, "there remains a certain duplicity in pretending to join the conversation with one's hosts, in good faith, while actually using it as a means to gather intelligence on them. Anthropologists often stress the importance, in fieldwork, of establishing rapport. But rapport can mean both friendship and report. Is it right to befriend people in order to write them up?" (Ingold 2018, 13).

Munira Khayyat writes about the same dilemma in her ethnography *A Landscape of War*. "It is politically relevant—especially to those of us researching, writing, *and living* in such worlds—to show that our ethnographic subjects are much more than mere illustrations of our academic arguments and steppingstones in our illustrious careers...They are us. Their lives matter" (Khayyat 2022, 17). The work I strive to do is one of good, my heart pure and my mind focused: I aim to shed light on the beauty of the Beta Israel community and to bring forward the voices

often silenced in Israeli society. To decolonize hegemonic understandings of what it means to be Jewish and what it means to be a Black Jew in this world. To benefit humanity as a whole through a more holistic and raw understanding of what it means to be human and clarify the universality of human behavior and feeling.

Antonio Gramsci, although not an anthropologist but an Italian Marxist intellectual, revolutionary, and social activist, has been commended for his concept of hegemony, which will appear vital to the topic at hand. Hegemony is an all-encompassing concept with influential meaning in all aspects of society. Anthropologist Kate Crehan analyzed the work of Gramsci in her book *Gramsci, Culture, and Anthropology*, expressing there that the concept of hegemony can be considered as, “a way of marking ever-shifting, highly protean relationships of power which can assume quite different forms in different contexts” (Crehan 2002, 101). Hegemony’s umbrella encapsulates the web of power framed largely by states and how that affects the ways in which people think, dream, and live. The move from Ethiopia for the Beta Israel saw a change in hegemonic structures, being that the dominant state actor went from the Christian Ethiopian government to the Jewish, Israeli government, which is historically largely controlled by Ashkenazi Jews. The ways that the community experienced racism and anti-Semitism, therefore, shifted, as if landing on a different planet.

Just as Gramsci explored the relationship between culture and hegemony, scholar Raymond Williams similarly delved into the relationship between cultural practices and power structures, citing Gramsci in some of his work. Williams sees hegemony as something larger than culture, because it relates to the “whole social process” of enculturation and power (Williams 1977, 108). People create the lives in which they live, but only to an extent, considering that inequalities and class differences influence one’s ability to maneuver and make

meaning of their lives. “It is a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living; our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world” (Williams 1977, 110). Hegemony organizes an entire society into hegemonic norms and values, that being the values that people adhere to, consent to, live by, and even struggle against. Hegemony becomes, in other words, the terms and conditions of everyday life, as difficult as it is to articulate them clearly and entirely.

Hegemony as socio-cultural practices is key to how power works without blunt force or coercion. By shaping how people understand themselves, hegemony becomes self-reinforcing; people comply because they see the system as legitimate and often as something that is in favor of their success. “The true condition of hegemony is effective self-identification with the hegemonic forms: ·a specific and internalized 'socialization' which is expected to be positive but which, if that is not possible, will rest on a (resigned) recognition of the inevitable and the necessary” (Williams 1977, 118). The hegemony of the Israeli State is a hegemony that is said to prioritize the well-being of all *Jews*. The Ethiopian Jews evidently fit into this category, but face discrimination because of their skin color and culture. Nonetheless, the Beta Israel are proud Jews and connect their Jewishness very intensely to the State of Israel, with the large majority of the community being open and enthusiastic supporters of Zionism.

Williams names one of the advantages of the concept of hegemony, specifically cultural hegemony, the fact that culture can be viewed as an integral factor in the hegemonic values present in everyday society. People constantly interact with one another, themselves, and their surroundings to create culture and reinforce the culture in which they live. This view of cultural hegemony then allows, “all these active experiences and practices, which make up so much of the reality of a culture and its cultural production to be seen as they are, without reduction to

other categories of content, and without the characteristic straining to fit them (directly as reflection, indirectly as mediation or typification or analogy) to other and determining manifest economic and political relationships” (Williams 1977, 111). Williams rejects reductionism and embraces formative, lived experiences, something that is critical when studying cultures and peoples. I intend to implement his theory into the topic at hand.

Gramsci’s notions of civil and political society have somehow simplified the complexity of hegemony within states and cultures, with civil society being the reinforcer of hegemony in everyday life and political society controlling more openly, forcefully, and abruptly. It is the cultural factors of hegemony that make dominating views seem natural because it happens with consent. Civil society includes class, institutions (both secular, religious, and familial), culture, and the arts: mundane aspects of life that people willingly consent to, unaware of the subtle but pervasive aspects of hegemony that shape their thoughts and actions. We all learn from these structures, as learning and socialization is a human universal. Yet what are we really being taught, and who is controlling this flow of knowledge?

The political society, on the other hand, consists of the government, the army, and the police. “Power Relations can be seen as occupying a continuum with direct coercion through brute force at one pole and willing consent at the other” (Crehan 2002, 101). Hegemony is then, according to Gramsci, something that people consent to because of the lack of awareness and/or alternative frameworks, being counterhegemony, that can challenge the dominant ideology. Such power relations are found between the Beta Israel community and the State of Israel, with subtle, systematic tendencies of the State holding underlying racist and ethnocentric undertones, which will be elaborated throughout the thesis.

The concept of Orientalism, influenced by Gramsci and hegemony, as analyzed intelligently by the late Jerusalemite Edward Said, will be vital in understanding the relationship between that of the Israeli State and Ethiopian Jews. The concept, however, must be understood through its own lens and origins, as articulated by Said, rooted in 19th century colonialist epistemologies of European invention. The damage and destruction of Orientalism is practically unfathomable: “a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony,” made and constantly reproduced to divide the white man of the West and the rest of the world (Said 1978, 5). The reason Said’s line of thinking resonates so well with the claims made in this paper is because the Israeli State *is* that of the West: a country that is considered one of the only ‘developed’ countries in the Middle East and a country where the State is viewed as ‘civilized’ and respected by Western powers.

Before a more in-depth analysis can be made, I must acknowledge the outdated, and quite frankly problematic, terms that I will use, being the ‘Orient’ and the ‘Occident’. These terms are the substructure of Orientalism, being that the Orient, or the global majority, was created by Euro-American societies to define themselves. This notion of othering is completely man made; that is to say that this theory makes no legitimate claim, yet it has worked wonders for the colonial powers and other hegemonic structures that oppress others for their own benefit.

The importance of Orientalism regarding the Beta Israel community stems from the fact, “that ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied” (Said 1978, 5). The hegemonic structures that control thought processes in the minds of the community define the Beta Israel, making them who they are. They control the affects associated with notions of race,

gender, religion, and nationality, which is the very examination of the thesis at hand. It is culture, then, itself a messy and contested concept, that makes hegemony as powerful as it is.

Orientalism is defined by the notion that the West is the society that is most ‘correct’ because of the way in which modernity, as well as the shape of civilization and development, has found itself in contemporary life. The Beta Israel, coming from rural Africa, lived a different lifestyle. Many lived in houses made of clay and did not wear shoes, a conception of everyday life foreign to the state of which they now reside (Abebe 2021, 106). Their arrival can be compared to Orientalism in the view of other Israelis who saw themselves as superior. The hegemony present in Israel led its society towards effects of disdain and lack of acceptance for the new immigrants and their way of life, which in turn created an affective response of embarrassment and a need for assimilation into Israeli life. Such affects are generational, seeping into the lives of the next generations of the community in Israel, yet taking different forms, which will be surveyed in the coming chapters.

Just as Gramsci understood hegemony in civil society as consensual, Said also hints that the so-called ‘Orient’ is in its place because it is able to be dominated and controlled. He implies it almost as if it is consensual. “Because it *could* be—that is, submitted to being-*made* Oriental” (Said 1978, 6). The main problem with this statement is the danger of painting the picture that these people are genuinely subordinate. The Beta Israel have and still are seen by Israeli society as quiet, polite, and passive because of their own cultural upbringings that prioritize respect. Professor Don Seeman heard at a protest in Israel by an Israeli, “What happened to the quiet Ethiopians?” (Seeman 2009, 160). The Ethiopian Jews come from a different culture that is less aggressive and straight-forward than that of the latter, which is seen by Israeli society as a sign of submission or inferiority, rather than cultural values rooted in respect, humility, and honor.

Said's claim that the 'Orient' submits to the dominance of Israeli hegemony critiques how colonial powers impose their own understandings of societal structures onto other communities, leading to a distorted image of reality.

Why do I make the claim that Israel, a Jewish State with Jews from almost every continent, could be compared to colonialist states? Said asks the question: "How does Orientalism transmit or reproduce itself from one epoch to another?" (Said 1978, 15). I add onto this question, pondering how Orientalism reproduces itself from one *state* to another. The State of Israel itself was formed largely by European Jews with the help of the British, one of the largest colonial powers in the world. (This is not to say that the *concept* of Zionism itself was not practically universal among the Jewish diasporas. Here I speak of the creation of the State.) It is worth noting that the Israeli government has had members from Beta Israel and the MENA region that partake in contemporary matters, as well as Israeli Arab/Palestinian and Druze members, which has led to significant strides in recognition for communities outside that of the Ashkenazi Jew. Nonetheless, the substructure of the country has an epistemological order similar to that of Western powers, perhaps explaining why the U.S. and Israel are such good friends. Although the British have long departed and the government is not all Ashkenazi Jews, the thesis will illustrate that the basis on which the authorities built the State left a colonial aftertaste. The authorities are, "persuasive; it has status, it establishes canons of taste and value; it is virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true, and from traditions, perceptions, and judgments it forms, transmits, reproduces" (Said 1978, 20). Just as all states, the State of Israel is flawed. The legacy of the beginning of the State mirrors colonial patterns of domination and reproduction through systems that sustain hegemonic power and privilege.

As explained earlier of the generalized and over-simplified view of the two aliyot made from Ethiopia to Israel, there is comfort in the ignorance of viewing an entire community as a people with the same experiences and struggles. In an astute manner, “Gramsci always recognized that subaltern groups are not homogeneous, that they have their own hierarchies and inequalities, and that it cannot be assumed that all the members of a particular subaltern group see the world in the same way” (Crehan 2002, 5). Gramsci prioritized in his work the importance of individual lived experience, underscoring the many differences in the lives and kinship networks present in the community. “Gramsci was also aware that however isolated and seemingly remote such communities may appear, they are in fact embedded in larger political and economic realities” (Crehan 2002, 5). The matter at hand will be surveyed in a way that opposes the monolithic narrative.

This will be accomplished with the help of the perspective of anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod. In her ethnography *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories*, Abu-Lughod writes stories and conversations as the structure of the book, which is different from many other academic works in anthropology. The beauty of writing in this fashion, however, is the individualism and autonomy given back to the people that make up such a rich and diverse community. Additionally, this method of narrating, which is similar to the goals of Raymond Williams, is that the book can reach a larger audience because it is easier to understand, adding to the impact it can have. This underscores the limitations of scholarly anthropological work, which often creates a, “gap between the professional and authoritative discourses of generalization and the languages of everyday life (our own and those of others) [which] establishes a fundamental separation between the anthropologist and his or her readers, on the one hand, and the people being written about, on the other, that in turn facilitates the construction

of these others as simultaneously different and inferior” (Abu-Lughod 1993, 8). Making the ethnography coherent and understandable to a larger audience will undoubtedly affect more individuals and lead to a deeper understanding of this community of study and therefore to the human experience as a whole.

The relationship of generalizations and anthropology is a complex one that must be avoided. Abu-Lughod warns anthropologists to be cautious in their work, as one of the problems of generalization, “is that by producing the effects of homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness, it contributes to the creation of “cultures” (Abu-Lughod 1993, 9). This leads to Abu-Lughod’s theory of “writing against cultures.” That is, writing against the homogenous view of culture, what culture means, and dangerous stereotyping and generalizations that go along with culture. Writing to bring meaning to the lives of people within a certain community with the goal of not generalizing, but providing true and straight information as it was said or seen. Culture is then not viewed as something that is simple and coherent, but as a large and never-ending complexity. There are no two people that think and feel exactly the same, even though there are some consistent hegemonic norms and thought processes in every society.

I seek to create an ethnography inspired by that of Lila Abu Lughod’s *Writing Women’s Worlds*, which was implemented through the lens of individual stories that connect broader trends and themes. It is the individual stories and narratives of communities that prevent homogenization and dangerous stereotypes that continue to penetrate people of identities that do not adhere to Western understandings of people.

Methods

An ethnography would be incomplete without a concise survey of the methodology implemented. The scope of my research undoubtedly falls under that of cultural anthropology, with the goal of understanding the inner workings of the livelihoods present in the Beta Israel community. Such an intimate conception will hopefully lead to a more empathetic approach to helping the community in Israel and a more compassionate society as a whole. This framework will prove vital for an enhanced comprehension of the experiences through which I observed and learned as both an ethnographer and a human being.

Credit must be given to Bronislaw Malinowski for making popular the method of participant observation, which has led to massive breakthroughs in the field. Yet it is important to first acknowledge the large criticism he has received as an anthropologist and a human being, with notions of racism, sexism, and Eurocentrism being just a few of the allegations he's been accused of (Cassar 2024). I mention this not to discredit the work he has done for the field, but to acknowledge the harm and misconstrued data of communities and people with which he worked.

I give credit to Malinowski not for the method of participation itself, but for being, “the first professional anthropologist to provide his readers with an accurate and comprehensive account of how he carried out his field work and recorded his data” (Baker 1987, 15). His fieldwork in the Western Pacific had a focus on participant observation which led him to the realization that in order to understand people, one has to live and interact with them for an extended period of time. This is done, and proves functional, because over time, it is possible to get an inner look into the ontological order of the society, as well as epistemological underpinnings that engulf the every-day, mundane aspects of being. What Malinowski calls the “imponderabilia of actual life” is the depth of meaning that can be obtained through participant observation (Malinowski 2014, 18).

Participant observation in simple terms is the anthropological method of observing people while participating in their lives in order to understand them. “For Malinowski, really being in contact with the natives is a matter of becoming inconspicuous, so that the natives carry on in their natural course, rather than the ethnographer empathizing with them” (Baker 1987, 18). Malinowski wrote much during his fieldwork of the view of the natives as inferior because of their lack of a Western understanding of the world, which is where he failed in his work. The beauty of getting such a close look at other cultures can serve as a pathway to the realization of humanity: it is not all that is the West. It is up to the ethnographer to have the ability to comprehend the world “they inhabit through their eyes” (Crehan 2002, 4).

Malinowski’s contributions are helpful, but much different from the fieldwork in which I took part. Zora Neale Hurston’s participant observation with black communities in the Southern United States, as well as the Caribbean and beyond, demonstrates more justly and compassionately the beauty that participant observation can hold. The act of viewing the community at hand as one of magnificent complexity and not as ‘savage’ or ‘inferior’ will manifest itself as the substructure of this ethnography. Despite the knowledge gathered from Malinowski, his perspective and experiences are that of a white man, which cannot apply to me. That is why I value the perspectives of Abu-Lughod and Hurston for this inquiry.

Just as I did this summer, “Hurston deliberately takes an informal and first-person approach to conveying her research and chooses not to remove herself from the experience in order to record Haitian and Jamaican cultural events” (Russell 2017, 128). I was present and active at rituals such as synagogue and buna, the commonplace activities of daily life for the community. Although perhaps considered less ‘scientific’, I followed in Hurston’s footsteps as a human being interacting with other human beings, rather than a researcher interacting with

interlocutors. In the same light, Hurston's "direct interaction with the people and customs of the local communities sets her research apart from that of other anthropologists at this time, and allows her to input her own experiences into her research" (Russell 2017, 128). I give great credit to this approach because the connections and the comfortability of this fieldwork has not only taught me a tremendous amount about the community, but it has also taught me more about myself. Talking with friends, or rather 'interlocutors', leads me to say with confidence that they feel the same.

Tim Ingold suggests participant observation is not a means to the *end product* of ethnography, but an honor that the anthropologist has to learn from the community they are engulfed in, similar to that of a student and a teacher. Such a humanistic perspective underscores the lack of humanity that was the foundation of anthropology. "It is not about writing other lives, but about joining with them in the common task of finding ways to live" (Ingold 2018, 14). All parties involved should *benefit*, transforming and shifting with new knowledge, adapting to new experiences, and becoming better people. This can most easily be achieved through participant observation because of the closeness: the personal relationships that are made through such an endeavor.

The privacy of my interlocutors is of great importance, which is why I will use pseudonyms for all interlocutors except a few, in which I use their real names with enthusiastic permission and for their benefit: to introduce the readers to exceptional individuals who willingly accept their names being publicized to further the success of the projects of which they are a part. I will clarify the names that are pseudonyms and those that are not.

In order to clarify the population of this ethnography, I will briefly explain my dilemma. Although some interlocutors ranging a multitude of ages were born in Ethiopia and immigrated

at a young age, they do not necessarily hold the same values, understandings of Ethiopian dialects, and clothing choices as individuals who spent their formative years in Ethiopia. For that reason, the "first generation" framework does not refer to this separation in worldview.

Therefore, I will use the "next generations" to refer to those who were raised in Israel and visibly exhibit signs of the next generations, such as Western clothing and an Israeli accent, regardless of their place of birth.

The *majority* of conversations this summer were spoken in *Hebrew*. I will translate all conversations and direct quotations into English for the sake of the audience, but this comes with a loss. Abu-Lughod explains, "Nor is the problem simply that inevitable shifts of meaning occur when one moves between languages in which expressions have no precise equivalents and words have varying connotations. Rather, it seemed that a number of essential qualities of everyday conversation and narrative just could not gracefully be carried over into English" (Lughod 1993, 35). With this in mind, I will do my best to convey not the exact translation, but the translation that will most coherently display the words or phrases to English. Because of this dilemma, I will also translate the ethnography to Hebrew to ensure it is available to Hebrew speakers, specifically the Beta Israel community themselves, as it is for them this piece is written.

Aside from participant observation, I conducted unstructured interviews during which I engaged in casual conversation with interlocutors and their families. Unlike Abu-Lughod, I did not record conversations, which would have made the findings much clearer and easier to tackle. The only method of gathering data was that of fieldnotes. No surveys or something of that sort was needed, considering participant observation and unstructured interviews seemed the appropriate route for this thesis, being that these methods are often the most promising for ethnographic fieldwork, being that of "lived experience."

Positionality

As I was a passive character in the lives of the people in this community and to whom I spoke to, I let the conversation flow naturally. There were no set questions or interviews, but rather people engaging in meaningful dialogue: dialogue being not discussion or debate, but the act of eagerly working to learn and understand one another, even if I was not in agreement. In this way, I was also vulnerable and spoke about my own experiences being Black and Jewish.

Lila Abu-Lughod uses the term “halfie” to describe her positionality within ethnographic research conducted with Egyptian women. “Being a “halfie,” participating in both American and Arab identities, was both important in determining what I sought to do in my writing and crucial to them in their acceptance of me” (Abu-Lughod, 1993, 39). In the same light, my Jewish and Black identities were the half that connected me with them, while my American and Ashkenazi backgrounds set me aside from them and required me to acknowledge my role as a Westerner. As Lila Abu-Lughod mentions, “Like other scholars critical of the notion of “objectivity” in social science, I have argued (1989, 1991) that we need to take greater account of the specific relations of the researcher to the object of study” (Abu- Lughod 1993, 40). I therefore acknowledge my privilege, the fact that I am about to graduate from one of the top twenty-five universities in the United States and will have this thesis published through the University for a largely Western audience.

My many identities played noteworthy roles throughout my time in the field. Although both Black and Jewish, I am an American citizen that comes from an Ashkenazi Jewish background. Nearly all of the community that I interacted with did not believe me when I said I was not Ethiopian. Many thought that I was lying to get attention. The chai² on my necklace,

² Chai means life in Hebrew and is often worn by Jews, symbolizing their Judaism.

meaning life and a symbol of Judaism, was a visible sign of my Judaism, with perhaps my Hebrew leading to the same inference. My last name, a very common name in Ashkenazi Judaism, often shocked and led to laughter from the Ethiopian community, who had never encountered an Ashkenazi who was not white. Judaism was my ‘way in’ to the community as told to me by many interlocutors.

My positionality in this ethnography is quite unique, considering my cultural background and lived experience. I am a practicing Jew. My mother is Jewish, (Jewish law states if one’s mother is Jewish, then the child is fully Jewish) and my father is not. I grew up in a semi-religious household, had a Bat Mitzvah, attended Shabbat services at synagogue weekly and have continued to do so in my life in college. I am knowledgeable on the ritualistic and symbolic aspects of Judaism. This gave me many advantages in my ethnography because the religion that is so important to the community, shaping their lives and their movements, is a religion, culture, and identity that I am also a part of and care about deeply.

My father is African American and Caribbean. These black identities were my first line of defense, something of a camouflage, blending in and not causing too much attention to myself. There is a strong Jamaican influence in Ethiopia, with the Rastafarian community finding strong ties to African ways of life. Although my father has roots in the Virgin Islands and not Jamaica, there are certain ‘universals’ present in Caribbean culture, especially in the U.S., to which many Caribbeans have immigrated. Such an influence in Ethiopia, as well as the Caribbean influence on Beta Israel in Israel today, surprisingly proved itself of much importance during my fieldwork. Ethiopian clubs in Israel are dominated by dancehall, a Caribbean genre of music, and a famous Caribbean singer flew to Israel to perform at one during the time of my fieldwork. Ethiopian children and young adults can often be heard saying “Bomboclaat,” a curse

word in Jamaican Patois to express their excitement or anger. Quite a few people in the community, male and female alike, have dreadlocks, a hairstyle associated with the Rastafari movement and the Caribbean more generally. Such weight of Caribbean culture on the community is then something I was very easily able to spot, from mundane phrases and hair styles to dance moves in clubs.

Both the Beta Israel and I are Black and Jewish, yet we do not share the same history nor present. Historically, and perhaps even to this day, an abundance of racist ideations dominates the study of cultural anthropology. That is where the term “cultural relativism” comes into play, a phrase coined by Franz Boas, known to many as the “father of modern anthropology” (Spiro 1986). Cultural relativism furthers the notion of the importance of not judging or looking down upon another culture, because every culture has different sets of morals, rituals, and ways of life. There is no one “right” or “superior” culture. With that knowledge at hand, the ethnography is presented from this mindset: judgment free and without pre-prescribed notions of what is taboo or not in society.

I am morally forced to address the following, as it does and does not pertain directly to this ethnography, but it is against my moral compass to say nothing. I will refer to the Israel/Palestine region as Israel in this ethnography for the sake of the matter at hand, being that Israel, as stated in the Torah, is a land that Jewish people have had a connection to for centuries. The dream of this community to live in Israel presents Israel as a land and not as a *state*, but evidently since 1948, the State of Israel has implemented a strenuous degree of dominance through hegemony on all parties, including Israeli Arabs and Palestinians, present in the land. I take this as an opportunity to acknowledge Palestinian livelihood and autonomy.

This ethnography will be guided by a few specific events and places of importance to the community, demonstrating both the effects and *the affective responses*³ that followed them. The realities of each individual member of the community presents the finding of anything but a monolith, a complex and ever-evolving society with many different experiences, narratives, and histories in both Ethiopia and Israel proper. I propose an ethnography that works to answer the following questions:

How do systematic epistemologies of power in Israel continue to oppress the Beta Israel community? In the same light, how do these epistemologies under Israel's hegemony shape how this community, specifically the next generations, perceive their Ethiopian culture and identity?

The importance and significance of the Beta Israel community is rooted in both the history and the contemporary aspects present in the lives of the Ethiopian Jews. The goal of this ethnography is to paint a picture of love for the community. A love that has traveled through hundreds of thousands of miles, from the beginning of Ethiopian Jewry to the present, never halting or faltering. It has changed shape over centuries, proving itself a strong and unwavering love. The generations of Ethiopian Jewry in Israel are born into much different lives than their parents. Big cities are dominated by people of lighter skin and a diversity of cultures, languages, and understandings of the world, the first and only Jewish State in the world. What are these next generations doing in this place? What does the preservation of traditional Beta Israel culture look like today?

³ Coined by Wilhelm Wundt in the 19th century; the word is made to account for the human universal of feeling: the human's emotional response to situations. "There is no affect without culture" (Bollmer, 2022).

An ethnography is an academic paper consisting of historical and contemporary facts and opinions pertained through ethnographic research. Ultimately, the unique factor of anthropology is the immersion of the ethnographer into the group being studied, to be able to give firsthand information from interlocutors on site. With great pleasure I will share my findings, but to make sure the experience I endured is pictured fully, I will also share my feelings. The amount of joy and love present in this research cannot be explained through just scientific findings, but from the heart. This ethnography is not just a paper to inform, but a real and true lived experience, with fears and failure, fun and desire, love and pain. I thank you in advance for appreciating and understanding the importance of this research, and the vulnerability that has been put into it to get the most accurate and true understanding of this community, as well as for leading me to the most beautiful friends and family I could ever ask for.

Rivka

“We must strive to bring holiness into every aspect of our lives, from the mundane to the sacred.” Rabbi Ovadia Yosef

A Religious Beach

A few days after we met, Rivka and I went to the beach. She explained that she only goes to the religious beach because only women are allowed to enter on certain days, and it is therefore acceptable to wear a more revealing bathing suit. We clicked right away. Her smile is bright, and her spirit is welcoming; she feels like home. She was already at the beach when I got there, so I walked in by myself. I took an electric scooter all the way down Tel-Aviv’s coast to find the last section of beach closed off by a wall. I parked my scooter and went over, to find a sign that read: “Welcome to an authorized gender-alternating beach. Please dress modestly.” Next to it was written the alternating days, half for women, half for men. I walked in to find dozens of orthodox women dressed in modest bathing suits. I wondered why they were continuing to cover their entire body even though there were no men. I could not imagine, given I was sweating in a sleeveless dress.

It was easy to spot her, as she was the only black woman and one of the only women in a two-piece bikini. I immediately asked her why all of the women were still covered, the response being that the lifeguard is a man, and that even though there are no men around (besides the lifeguard), they continue to dress modestly because it is what they are used to and comfortable doing. It is routine. I applied sunscreen while she rolled us up tobacco to smoke.

She began to tell me about her life. She is twenty-four, and until four years ago, she was not religious. She used to go to all of the Ethiopian Israeli clubs and drink and even has tattoos (a

violation of Jewish precepts). She told me how happy she is to have Hashem⁴. She told me she found herself and is now on the right path. It seemed that her old self was fun at the moment, but she felt it wasn't right for her long term. She has more time now to focus on her studies and to spend time with her nieces and nephews, whom she loves dearly. She has friends that aren't religious, but she is not close to them anymore because they do not often find joy in the same things. Rivka is not comfortable in settings with unmarried men, because of the immodesty it could bring, so she only has friends that are women. It does not seem to bother her, as she spends her days working and studying, praying and with family. She wants to go to fashion school during the day and study Torah at Seminary at night.

Like all families that I have come to know in the community, some of the children are religious, and some are not. I did not meet a family that had less than two children from the first generation of parents that immigrated to Israel. Rivka is one of six, and only her and her brother are religious⁵. Her brother is the first Ethiopian Jewish man that I ever met wearing payot, the hair that religious men leave on either side of their head to grow out in adherence to religious tradition. Payot are a sign of strict observance of Judaism. I watched once as one of his sisters braided the payot against his scalp, following him returning the black hat to his head. The hair texture of Ethiopians is evidently different from those of Eastern European descent, so the hair does not fall in the same way. For that reason, braiding the hair at night and unbraiding it in the morning presents the payot in a form similar to Ashkenazi Jews.

⁴ Hashem is another name for G-d. I will often use the name Hashem, as it is against my custom to write G-d's name in vain, and it is also the name that is most commonly used among Ethiopian Jews.

⁵ Being religious can take on many different meanings for different people. Religious in the context of this ethnography is one that keeps Shabbat, prays every day, and exhibits modesty practiced by orthodox sects of Judaism.

Rivka and her brother are the most religious people I have met in my life. Rivka prays all the time. She prays when she wakes up, before she drinks water, before and after she eats, after the bathroom, before bed, and somehow in between. Each time I was around her I would ask her the meanings of the prayers. Why do you do them? How do you have time for them? “There is always time for Hashem,” she would often say, smiling, glowing with the presence of the divine within her. She often prays for a husband and kids, as do the majority of religious female Jews, to fulfill the commandments of Hashem. She asks often that I pray for her to meet her husband in the near future, a moment that she is very eager to reach.

Unlike most of the Ethiopian Jewish young adults I interacted with, Rivka does not have Instagram. She told me she doesn't have any social media because it's not real. “It's fake. It's just a photo. It looks amazing but it really isn't.” She values living in what translates from Hebrew to English as “real time”, time that is not spent scrolling aimlessly on applications for no reason. She explained, “My time is expensive.” Using words such as “real” and “expensive” emphasize the spiritual and religious undertones Rivka expresses when making such claims. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel shares a similar sentiment of time, saying, “It is the dimension of time wherein man meets G-d, wherein man becomes aware that every instant is an act of creation, a beginning, opening up new roads for ultimate realizations. Time is the presence of G-d in the world of space, and it is within time that we are able to sense the unity of all beings” (Heschel 1951, 100).

She told me the hardest part of becoming religious was letting go of mainstream music. Afrobeats and dancehall are very popular genres of music within the Ethiopian Israeli community, which I will detail in a later chapter, and the most popular songs are often those with swear words and lyrics about sexual interactions and drugs. This evidently goes against the new

Rivka. I am not all that familiar with afrobeats, but I am knowledgeable on Caribbean music, so I offered her a different genre other than dancehall, called soca. It has many songs about the beauty of life and being grateful. I offered to make her a playlist and she accepted enthusiastically.

A rock jetty separating the religious beach from the rest of the ocean calls out to us, as we walk towards it with the hopes of climbing it and looking over. We climb the rocks and see the vast Mediterranean Sea, suddenly making everything we've said about our lives feel smaller. Shortly after we parted, our first meeting only bringing us closer together.

The Birthday Kotel Party

About a month after this day, we had become very good friends, and we finally went to Jerusalem to pray in celebration of her birthday. I bought her a flower crown, which is an Israeli ritual of congratulations, along with a pair of earrings, and met her in Jerusalem. The look of shock and happiness when handed the gifts was one of appreciation; the thank you was not needed but given anyways. Although it was long after her birthday, I insisted she wear the crown, as street-goers continued to congratulate her on every corner. It was important to make sure that she got to experience her special day, even if it was later. We took a bus to the Kotel, the last wall standing from the destruction of the Second Temple. It is one of the holiest Jewish sites in the world, and a place that I feel a very strong spiritual connection to. We walked through the old city of Jerusalem, down different alleys with Jewish and Arab shops alike, filled with spices, pots and pans, gifts, and souvenirs for people at home. I stopped at many shops, admiring the different colors and the different symbols on display, thinking of what my family would like.

As we walked by, I noticed a tallit and a keffiyeh hanging next to each other on the same rack, both waiting to be bought. These two strong symbols (of Jewish and Palestinian identity), juxtaposing each other, yet swaying in the wind so peacefully. Maybe we can learn from the objects themselves.

When we got to the Kotel, we walked down the large stairs, the sun beating down on us. Rivka asked me if I've ever been inside the tunnels next to it, to which I answered, "I don't think so." So, we went inside, kissing the *mezuzah* on the doorpost, hit by a welcomed rush of cold air, and began to venture. We passed different tourists and tour groups, winding down dimly lit hallways, cold caves covered in ancient stone. We stopped at what I later knew to be the Sha'arei Teshuva synagogue, located within the Western wall tunnels. We walked in and Rivka got us permission to get closer to it: the *Aron Kodesh*. A large circle of gold, its membrane covered in Hebrew letters, circling a Torah in its entirety. Rivka went up to it and put her hand on it. "So holy." I followed, putting my hand on it as well. The cold, hard letters made me jump, but I ran my hand against them, trying to get a taste of the holy feeling Rivka had. She told me more about the place we were in, and how near us was the holiest part of the Kotel, the *Kadosh Hakodashim*, in English *the holy of holies*, the place where the world is said to be created in Jewish tradition. We took a photo and continued on.

Down more halls, we began to hear noises of prayer. It felt almost as if we were in a cave with spirits echoing off the walls. She told me there is another synagogue here. She asked me if I wanted to pray there, and I reminded her: "It is your birthday. We do whatever you want!" She smiled and we began to walk in, but she stopped us. "We have to go wash." Before one prays, it is important to do the ritual of washing hands, so we went back down the winding halls outside to the handwashing stations, where we washed and said the blessings. We went back to where we

came from, walking through the door of the synagogue. I followed her lead, feeling immediately out of place, as all of the women were visibly religious and white, of which I was neither. Some women looked at us, but most of them continued praying. Rivka handed me a siddur, a prayer book, and we began to walk towards the other side of the women's section. There were no men in sight, but their voices were booming against the walls, sounding almost frightening.

Rivka and I put our things down, and I sat, opening the siddur to a random page and seeing if I could figure out what prayer I landed on. I was still getting used to the siddurim that are only Hebrew. Rivka began her prayers, going into a world of her own. Her eyes began to close as her mouth continued mumbling the words, the words that she recites so often that she knows them by heart. She rocked back and forth, and I began to see her as maybe she sees herself: first Jewish, then Black. I watched her pray and my heart began to warm. I thought of her mother, a mother who went through so much to ensure that Rivka could be there, in Jerusalem, praying to Hashem.

She finished sometime later and asked me if I wanted to see the men. I said yes, as although it is taboo, I was curious to see. She pulled back the curtain that the women had to block them from seeing the men, and there they were: hundreds of men in large black hats swaying and chanting Hebrew prayers. I watched in awe and disbelief. After a few minutes, we got our things, put back the siddurim, and walked out of the synagogue area. We walked in silence, soaking in the last of the moments.

When we opened the doors, the sun hit very strongly, but I was eager to go to the part of the Kotel that I was familiar with. We walked to the women's section of the wall, and I found myself a small opening for my body to squeeze through in between the many women touching the wall. Folded papers held scattered dreams and prayers hiding in the wall's cracks, waiting to

be answered. I put both of my hands on the wall and felt a well of tears wash over me. Here I was, against all odds, a Black queer Jew, learning about the people I care about and living in the holiest place in the world. “All thanks to Hashem”, I said, grasping the wall, feeling as if I would fall at any moment. I said some prayers for my family and for the world and turned around to find Rivka waiting for me. We started walking backwards, facing the wall, and I took one last glimpse at the wall before we went.

We walked to the bus station, making a quick stop to get ice cream from a small stand at the entrance to the Old City gate. Then we got on the bus to head back to the train station for me to go back to Tel Aviv. We hugged and said goodbye.

Now

Rivka is now at Midrasha, a place to study Judaism and Torah, in a village outside of Jerusalem. Whenever we talk, she tells me how happy she is there with the other women, doing what Hashem wants. It never seems to bother her that she is one of the only Ethiopians in the house of dozens of girls. Perhaps for her, Judaism comes before the color of her skin.

My Beginning

My journey with the Beta Israel community began in the winter of 2021, when I first went to Kfar Beta Israel, in Southern Israel. I was on a gap year program with other American Jews after high school, a very common and often encouraged journey for American Jews to study and volunteer in Israel. I was on a program called Young Judaea, where I spent four months in Tel Aviv volunteering at a sexual assault crisis center and four months in Jerusalem studying Judaism in a small university. We took many trips around the country, learning about the diverse and unique communities that live in the land.

The racism I endured during these months in Israel was both unexpected and heartbreaking. I had thought that because I am Jewish, I would be safe and accepted for who I am. I also considered the Israeli government to be a just government because it is run by Jews, but evidently Jews are also humans, filled with attitudes of corruption, racism, and bigotry. I dealt with racist comments and names from both American Jews and Israeli Jews and racial profiling from police and bus monitors, things that had never happened (often) to me in the United States⁶. I felt in need of people who could understand what it means to have black skin, and I found some of those people at Kfar Beta Israel.

One of the places we went to was Kfar (village in Hebrew) Beta Israel, a village in the city of Kiryat Gat, a small city with many flowers, roundabouts that lead from older housing to new, tall buildings, industrial areas, and a diversity of Jews. The Kfar is not a real village, but an imitation of what some of the villages in Ethiopia looked like for the Ethiopian Jews. Different

⁶ The months of my fieldwork this summer led to a completely different experience: because I was not surrounded by majority white individuals, but instead the Beta Israel community, there were no instances I can note that I felt racism.

groups both inside of Israel and internationally come to this village to learn about the culture and the history of the Beta Israel community, as I did with Young Judaea.

The bus ride consisted of fairly empty roads, much different from Tel Aviv. There was beautiful, simple scenery, consisting mostly of agriculture and open fields. We turned into a gate and got off the bus and into the scorching hot sun. We walked through a straw gate and down a paved path with flags lining it, flags that read Kfar Beta Israel interchanging with Israeli flags, and past farming land with different plants growing. Hundreds of tiny red peppers peaked out through rows of green as subtle stars in the night sky, catching my eye as they twinkled against the sun. A little girl peaked behind a building and looked at us. We made eye contact, and as we both smiled, she ran shyly the other way.

We were led to a large wooden structure with naked walls, pieces of wood and straw allowing light to seep through into the room. Fine gravel crunched under our feet as we were led to sit. An Ethiopian woman said something in Hebrew, and our Rabbi began to welcome us to the place. He served as her translator as she told us the inner workings of the village and its purpose of preserving Ethiopian Jewish culture. She then began to tell her journey as a child from Ethiopia to Israel. She grew up in a kfar in Ethiopia, years she remembers as joyful and stress free. These years, she often heard around her about a faraway place called Jerusalem and was told that one year they will take a journey there. In 1980, she left Ethiopia at age eight, and had a very long and hard journey. With around fifty to sixty family members, she traveled for two weeks to Sudan by foot. She lived two years in a refugee camp in Sudan, surviving confusion, disease, and loss.

The distance to Jerusalem seemed closer when a truck came to the refugee camp in the middle of the night, squeezing 150 people in the body, telling them they all must be silent; there

is no moving, no speaking, and the babies must not cry. Along the ride, they were stopped by Sudanese police, who went around the back of the truck, knocking very hard on the back, where she and her family stayed silent, not breathing, on the other side. When no movements or sounds responded, the police left. It was a miracle that they did not open the back. The truck led them to a boat, where they traveled for three weeks until she finally reached Israel at ten years of age. She first went to Ulpan to learn Hebrew, as all new immigrants in Israel do, and then was put into school, where she was the only black student. She brought with her something new to Israel: “a different culture, a different color, and different understandings to society. And with all of this I need to integrate into Israeli society. They don't accept these differences easily.” The struggles did not break her but built her up. Her name is Geula Hadaray.

In the back of the room, there was a table with many pieces of traditional Ethiopian clothing on it, which we were told to put on. We all stood in a circle as traditional Ethiopian music was played, and we followed the moves of Geula and the little girl from before, who was standing next to her. The little girl stared at me as I cheered her on, her soft smiling growing wider with the red in her cheeks. She went into the middle with a push from Geula and began to move her shoulders up and down to the beat of the music. Everyone joined along laughing and joking, while the little girl and I started to dance together. We held hands and looked at each other, an electric current of connection seeping through us. It became clear that maybe she took a special interest in me because I was the only black person out of at least 50 people. As I came back to the place multiple times after the first encounter, it appeared that the groups that come consist mostly of white people.

When the songs ended and we began to pack our things, the little girl pulled me, and we ran outside of the room. We began to play outside together, running in between the *Gojos*, the

traditional houses from the kfars in Ethiopia, circular structures made with circular roofs, all made by materials from nature. The little girl started speaking to me in fast Hebrew. “I don't understand, cutie” I replied in Hebrew, suddenly feeling frustrated and wishing I could communicate with her. At this time my Hebrew was not so good, so I used the few words I knew as we ran around, telling her my name and where I'm from. “You are so beautiful!” Her deep brown eyes smiled a big thank you. Her name is Yafa. Yafa was the candle that lit the flame of love that I have for this community. Amid racism and problems in Israel, I saw a little black girl that reminded me of myself. A little black Jewish girl with a huge smile, a smile that can change the world.

As the group started to leave, we continued to hug and embrace each other, me feeling saddened that I would probably never see her again. Geula, who led the program, came up to us, and I told her how sweet and beautiful this girl is. She told me she was her niece. In broken Hebrew, I asked if it was possible to keep in touch, and she gave me her Instagram. An Instagram that has connected us and turned us into family.

Shortly after the experience at the kfar, I spoke with my rabbi about my interest in the Ethiopian Jewish community, which he began to teach me a little bit about. I then met a habesha woman named Batel, who became a close friend of mine. She told me her story about her Aliyah to Israel alone at age eighteen from Addis Ababa, where she was born and raised, which is much different from most Ethiopian Jewish stories of childhood and immigration. She introduced me to the cuisine and ritual, to her family and to an Ethiopian party. She not only taught me and brought me into the community, but she also gave me a strong and much needed sense of belonging after a life of only being surrounded by Ashkenazi Jews.

One evening of that year, she took me to a party called DNA. We approached the event and there were dozens of Ethiopians, but also other Africans and some white people, standing outside waiting to get in. Batel made a call, and we skipped the line and went in. Dancehall music was blasting from the speakers as people danced and drank. I had never seen so many black Jews in my life! We danced and laughed together as a man approached us, who Batel embraced warmly. She introduced him to me, telling him that I was new to Israel. He shook my hand and told me that if I needed anything here to call him. His name was Israel Dasa. That night, we went back to Batel's apartment with Israel and a few others and talked until the sun rose.

The last months of this gap year I spent at the parties of Israel Dasa. Every week I would go with new friends in the Beta Israel community that I had made and dance my heart out with a community of Jews that understand having black skin and love the same music as I do.

One evening, I got into the party with my friends as usual, my name on the list thanks to Israel, as we walked into the booming Afrobeats on the speakers. I spotted Israel and went up to him, hugging and thanking him as usual. He hugged me quickly and went away. I texted him after the party, saying "I wanted to speak with you, but you went away so fast!" For weeks I had been thinking about how grateful I was for his events, because through them, I found community and I found myself. I was due to return to the U.S. soon and was waiting for the right time to thank him properly, but I was too late. The next morning, Batel called me with the news: Israel Dasa had passed away. My heart shattered.

Israel Dasa was a superstar in the Ethiopian Jewish community. He was the creator and supporter of many Ethiopian parties that connected the community and provided a safe place for Ethiopian Jews to dance, rejoice, and connect. He provided a space for Ethiopian artists to

perform and be heard. It seems everyone in the community knew him, for when he died, social media flooded with love, with each person having their own stories with him. This goes to show just how much of an impact he had on individual people. *May his memory be a blessing. 5/9/22.*

A few days later, one of my best friends drove me and another friend that I met at his party to the funeral. Piercing wails of mourning women penetrated the air. Hundreds of friends and family took over the graveyard, standing as a prayer in Ge'ez was recited over a speaker. We later walked to the grave where each person took turns walking up to it and saying goodbye. My turn approached and I walked up, putting my hand on the soil. "I am sorry I never gave you the thank you deserved. Thank you for changing my life, for giving me some of my best friends and bringing me into your community. Thank you so much Israel." With that, the club shut down, but his memory lives on through the many people that knew and loved him.

This year evidently changed my life and serves as the foundation for the strong love and appreciation I have for this community and my strong desire to learn and help it as well. Since this year, I have been to Israel two other times, once in December 2023, two months after October seventh, and this summer, when I did my fieldwork. I went in December because of the strong desire to be with my friends there after the trauma they had endured and simply because I missed it.

My grandma agreed to let me go in December of 2023 with the condition that I volunteer. I wanted to volunteer with the Beta Israel community, but I did not know where. I remembered the woman, Geula, whom I had kept in touch with periodically over Instagram and asked her if it was possible to volunteer at the kfar. With joy, she said yes, and for two weeks in December, I went to Kiryat Gat to volunteer at the Beta Israel village. I stayed with a habesha friend that I made on my gap year who lives in Kiryat Gat. She came with me every day to the village and

helped translate for me so I could understand fully what the people were saying. We worked in agriculture, picked and sorted peppers, and helped set up for groups that came to learn. I spoke with the elders when they finished their morning work, while we drank *buna* (coffee) and ate *dabo* together. Yafa, Geula's niece, the little girl from some years before, was dropped off at the kfar after school, where we ran into each other's arms. It was much easier to speak to her this trip, as my Hebrew had improved immensely. We talked, hugged, and put on traditional Ethiopian clothing for photos together before we went our separate ways.



Figure 1. Yafa and I in traditional Ethiopian clothing at Kfar Beta Israel. Photo taken by Geula Hadaray.



Figure 2. Sorting out red peppers. Photo taken by Kaela Goldstein.

On this trip, I got very close with Geula. After volunteering one day, I went to Geula's house, and met her sons. Geula has a car, so she drove us to her house after the day of work at the kfar. She played traditional Ethiopian music in the car as the air conditioning kindly replaced the heat outside. She parked in front of a store with an Ethiopian flag on it and traditional Ethiopian clothing in the windowsill that stood next to a short apartment building. We got out and she waved to the owner of the store, as we walked down the path to her apartment. Outside of the building was a line of chairs up against the gate, where Ethiopian elders often go to sit and socialize. Her father, who works at the kfar in agriculture with other elders, was sitting there when we walked up. We greeted him and continued into the building, past the rows of drying laundry and stray cats.

Geula is a fashion stylist for women and dressed me up in beautiful Ethiopian clothing. She added certain 'Western' clothing, such as a jacket over a *Kemis*, a traditional Ethiopian dress of women, to illustrate the integration of Ethiopian and Israeli cultures together. She told me about her life journey through clothes, with three outfits that hung in the front hallway of her house. She told me that each dress illustrates a time period in her life. It is not just a dress, but memories, feelings, and experiences. Each dress serves as a piece of who she is, a piece of her identity and her history. She told me months later: "Every person needs to know where they came from and where they will go." I never did understand the meaning of clothes until I met this woman. When she is not at the kfar, she spends time uplifting women in seminars and events in all parts of Israel both with fashion and clothing and through her ability to inspire through words.

Aside from volunteering at the kfar, this trip consisted of a lot of time alone at the beach catching up with old friends and meeting others. The connection I have to many but not all of the

individuals in this ethnography began when I met them briefly at a *Shabbat Chatan* during this December trip. A Shabbat Chatan symbolizes the marriage of a new couple, occurring on the first Shabbat after the wedding. This event is usually for family, and perhaps close friends as well. The Ethiopian weddings in Israel all follow up with a Shabbat Chatan, except they are different from others, in that Ethiopian ritual engulfs the event. Elders come in traditional clothing, people sing to Ethiopian music and dance Ethiopian dances, and there is Ethiopian food and beverages. At the specific Shabbat Chatan I went to, there were pots of *tella*, one of, if not the most, popular Ethiopian beverage that resembles beer, being consumed at each table.

This Shabbat Chatan was my first, which a friend invited me to, knowing how much I love seeing and learning about the Ethiopian community. There were three long tables, one with the elders, and two with cousins all ranging from the ages of eighteen to fifty. Everyone was drinking and laughing and congratulating the bride and groom, while I smiled in nervous amazement at all of the Black Jews surrounding me, celebrating both identities that they have with joy and pride. Because most of the people there were cousins by some degree, people looked at me curiously, wondering who I was. I talked to many people that night, a blur of smiling faces, names I could not remember, and a language I was just beginning to understand. This past summer, the pieces were put together.

Volunteering Volumes

During the two months I spent in Israel this summer, I volunteered at the Balinjera restaurant and Kfar Beta Israel. These establishments were places I assumed to be good for such an ethnography, considering there is an abundance of culture surrounding food practice (the restaurant) and the kfar is a center focused on the culture itself more generally. Yet I had come to understand that young adults in the Beta Israel community do not frequent such establishments. I would have to find some other way to meet and interact with them. Despite the change in course of action, I continued to volunteer at both places as I had said I would, and learned more than I could have ever expected.

Balinjera

Balinjera is a small Ethiopian Jewish restaurant in the heart of Tel Aviv, about a two-minute walk from the beach, on a side street next to a crowded parking lot and a set of apartments. From the outside, one sees colorful walls with large windows in between, chairs and seats lining the entrance. Bright yellow, green, and red designs engulf the restaurant, in the middle the name of the restaurant written on one of the windows with a *mosev*⁷ next to it.

Inside is only about eight tables, tightly packed with the perfect amount of room to not feel too crowded. Winding stairs sit in a corner, leading to a place I never did know. Decorations and Ethiopian symbols surround the membrane of the small building: many mosevs and Ethiopian designs fabricating an environment like no other.

⁷ A conical basket with a flat top and a lid used to store injera and eat injera; often woven and decorated with Ethiopian patterns and colors.

A large painting covers the entirety of one of the walls, depicting the journey of the Beta Israel through the desert. Colors, hot and cold alike, mold together, with shadows of humans and horses lining the bottom. The center holds the image of mother and child looking off into the distance. The painting illuminates the feelings of yearning, caring, selflessness, and resilience. The colors create a gust of wind, pushing forward the shadows of people to the land of Israel, perhaps forcing them to continue on even with those left behind, and even when they felt they could not go any farther.

A counter sits in the center of the restaurant, separating the dining area from the kitchen. The kitchen, with different colors of vegetables, bubbling in their containers and creating a rainbow of excitement, makes patrons eager to taste.

The restaurant, as most visions, began as a small idea. Fanta Prada⁸, an Ethiopian Israeli Jew, has owned and operated the restaurant for almost ten years. The restaurant's fuel has and remains that of the family. Fanta's siblings and cousins work there, in addition to a few other people who although not blood, are undoubtedly family. These people include but are not limited to Gerry, Doctor, and Muhammad. Gerry is from Eritrea and is the cook for the restaurant. He works long hours every day except Shabbat (because the restaurant is closed). Although he is not Jewish or Ethiopian (granting Eritrea and Ethiopia are quite similar culturally and used to be one country), Gerry is considered family by Fanta and the rest of her kin and has worked in the restaurant for eleven years. We would greet each other every day in Amharic. He always helped me find things when I was lost and was patient with the Hebrew words that I didn't know, like closet or knife. Over the course of this summer, my vocabulary grew with his help.

⁸ Fanta's name and all names regarding Balinjera are their real names.

Doctor's real name is not doctor, but a nickname given to him by everyone at the restaurant because he has a doctoral degree. Doctor is from Dimona and is a part of the Hebrew Israelite community. He found himself at the restaurant because he cares about the work Fanta has made her life and wants to be a part of the good in the world. We would often talk about the world, and the work we can do to make it a better place. Similarly, Muhammad came to help, and has worked at the restaurant for seven years. Muhammad is an Israeli-Arab activist who does very important work in Israeli society to promote understanding and justice for marginalized communities. It makes sense, then, that he works at Balinjera, using his fluency in English to uplift the voices of the Beta Israel community, bridging the gap of language to convey Fanta's story and the history of the Beta Israel more generally to English speaking groups.

Neama is Fanta's cousin, a strong and independent woman who often kept the restaurant going on the days I was there during the summer, when Fanta and the others weren't working. She is kind, quiet, and genuine. Sara is another cousin, who works behind the scenes, making injera in the morning. My runs to the closet to grab supplies would lead to our short meetings, always sweet and loving despite their rapid departure. Israel is Fanta's younger brother who works often. He is a tall, slim, young man who wears a black kippah and a soft smile. He is a very kind and warm person, just as his siblings.

Tamar is Fanta's sister. The moment I met her I felt a very specific feeling of warmth in my heart, as if a piece of a puzzle that has been missing was found, giving hope that maybe the puzzle will reach completion. She has one of the biggest and most beautiful smiles I have seen; a smile that radiates from the inside out. Tamar speaks perfect English, which made it very easy to communicate with her as she explained different parts of the restaurant to me when I first started volunteering. She laughs often and jokes and made the volunteering there very enjoyable.

Almost daily, groups of people come to the restaurant to learn about Ethiopian Jewish culture. These consist of both Israeli groups and groups from abroad, almost always from the US and Europe. Teens and elders, families, and individuals, *Taglit*⁹ groups and Israeli activists and reporters come to the restaurant. Each time there is a group, either Fanta or one of her family members will speak to the group about the history of the Beta Israel, the struggle from Ethiopia to Israel, and the importance of preserving the culture, with a part of the culture undoubtedly being food!

They explain to the groups the different foods and their meanings: the injera is 100% teff, a grain that is something of a superfood and gluten free. This leads to many nods from visitors. They tell the groups that the traditional way of eating is with the hands. Dabo is explained by the restaurant as ‘Ethiopian challah’, which is commonly eaten on Shabbat and holidays. Many of the dishes are vegan because many led an agrarian life in Ethiopia.

Ashagar, Fanta’s niece, is a famous Ethiopian Israeli activist, owning the account @blackjewishmagic on Instagram with over 75k followers. The couple of months I was there, we crossed paths a few times, often because she came to tell her story to different groups that came through the restaurant. “I am living the fulfillment of my ancestors,” she often said when telling the story of her mother walking through the Ethiopian desert. Her mom was nine months pregnant with Ashagar and gave birth to her on the journey. Her father did not think they would make it, but sure enough, the family fulfilled the dream of coming to Jerusalem, the dream of their ancestors who believed they were the only Jews left in the world.

This story and this strong love for Israel, she says, underscores the notion that Zionism is not a belief only held among white people. “And I am the example,” Ashagar often asserts. She

⁹ Taglit is another way of saying Birthright: the free trip to Israel given to anyone that is Jewish around the world (with conditions).

tells about the hardships in Ethiopia and the challenges they faced because they were Jewish from missionaries and Christian neighbors who continued to harass them into converting. They thought that if they did not keep Judaism alive, it would be gone forever. She promotes Zionism very strongly through platforms such as her Instagram. She explains that the country is not perfect, but that does not make the love she has for it disappear.

When I asked Tamar why she doesn't often give the speech to groups, she said that she will happily do it if needed, but she does not have the same passion and drive as Fanta and Ashagar. She said that it was through them that she learned and understood the importance of the work that takes place at the restaurant. Little does Tamar know that although she does not make the speech all the time, she is a vital piece to the puzzle of the mission of this restaurant.

Fanta's story is the one I heard most often, the one that I continue to hear in my ears when everything is quiet, when I see a post of the restaurant on Instagram, and when I am yearning to return to Israel. Fanta is the oldest of her siblings and left the village in Ethiopia at age eight. She remembers the kfar as a perfect dream; no school but a lot of playing, talking, and doing fun things. The kfar, like most, was one centered around agriculture, which the women partook in along with birthing, teaching, and caring for their children. Fanta explains the immense strength of the Habesha woman. While she was oblivious and happy at her young age, her parents waited solemnly for their return to Jerusalem.

Fanta and her family were a part of Operation Solomon. She remembers the trip through the Ethiopian desert, where they walked for over a month from her village to Addis Ababa, stopping at villages in between. Tamar was born on the way. Fanta came to Israel older than many others, which is how she remembers life in Ethiopia. This memory fueled her desire to keep the Ethiopian traditions in Israel, to keep her roots around her. She felt she had to do

something to expose people to the beauty of the culture. So, she thought about how, and after many years, opened a restaurant. Like a tree, her roots branched out, connecting her with other people in the community and Israeli society. The relationship of trees is starkly similar to the work she is doing, reaching out and connecting with others, her restaurant serving as a steady trunk amidst hardships.

At the beginning, her mom was not happy, urging Fanta to go to school and get a degree. Fanta did just that and went to law school and was an attorney before she opened Balinjera. Fanta means hope in Amharic. How fitting, then, that Fanta created an Ethiopian Jewish restaurant in the heart of Tel Aviv, giving hope to an Israeli society that is more accepting of diversity and inclusion of all Jewish backgrounds. The restaurant itself can be then understood as a mode of resilience, of protest, just by merely being.

Kate Crehan proposes the following question based on Gramsci's work: "what keeps the subaltern, and how might their subalternity be overcome?" (Crehan 2002, 98). This leads to forms of counterhegemony, being movements and ideas that go against the seemingly 'natural' flow of hegemonic structures. I propose that Balinjera, the Ethiopian Jewish restaurant in which I volunteered this summer, classifies as a form of counterhegemony. Ethiopian Jews have gained their voices and accomplished their dreams, no longer on the sidelines or seen as 'polite' and 'passive' actors in Israeli society.

Balinjera is a play on words. 'Bali' in Hebrew means 'I want'. So Balinjera means 'I want injera'. Balinjera also stems from the meaning in Amharic of 'togetherness', a colloquial word for a friend, emphasizing the importance of injera not as food but as a symbol of community; it is meant to be eaten with others. "Injera is food that you eat together with everyone on one plate. If you eat faster than others, then they won't get to eat. It's about being

together,” an elder in the community told me. The mosev as an inviting table, a circle with no beginning and no end, a circle that is the embodiment of connectedness. For this reason, the mosev and injera are some of the central aspects of community next to buna.

The name of the restaurant itself has blended Hebrew and Amharic, Israeli culture and Ethiopian culture, crossing bridges for the next generations in Israel. The work of the restaurant introduces the Beta Israel community to the larger Israeli society both through food but also through stories, dancing, connection and kindness. In the two months that I was there, I never saw someone upset or angry, because the place has an atmosphere of love. The work is with love, the food is with love, and the culture comes from love.

Kfar Beta Israel

In an earlier chapter, I mentioned the time I spent at the kfar in December of 2023. Unlike the two-week trip from before, this summer gave me more time to spend both at the kfar itself and with the individuals that make the place so special. Although this ethnography is focused on the next generations in Israel and educating Israeli society on the community, the elders do important work aimed at preserving Ethiopian culture in the kfar. There are sectioned off plots of land at the kfar that the elders, ages sixty to ninety, own and protect, growing and caring for their food as they did in the kfars in Ethiopia. Vegetables are grown and tended to, and then eaten by the families that make them, symbolizing the livelihoods that they once had.

Life in Israel led to a major shift in occupation, as many of the elders were not qualified by Western standards for jobs other than cleaning streets and buildings. The high honor and respect that they received in Ethiopian society was no longer, and many of the elders lost their sense of identity and purpose. Geula once told a group that came to visit, “We want to give our

parents a space to grow and integrate into the society. We want them to have a defined identity and to feel like they belong here.” It is a space of acceptance. The work of the kfar is to reconnect and lift up the attitudes and understandings of the elders once more, to ensure they understand that their value as human beings has not withered. It is just the opposite, in that the immigration to Israel and the resilience they exhibit should only make them more respected by their own community and Israeli society more generally. Geula points out, “They now have something to wake up to, 6 days of the week, each one with his own capabilities.” This sentiment stresses the importance of the kfar and the dignity reinstalled in the elders.

I passed many elders on the streets and in buildings in different cities in Israel while they were working, and almost every time I stopped and shook their hand in the traditional way of respect: the right hand outstretched to shake, and the other placed on the opposite elbow. I greeted them in Amharic and blessed them as a way to uplift their moods. The work they do and the way they are often treated, as many low-wage workers experience globally, leads to affects of disdain and embarrassment. These feelings are also exhibited by the next generations, as many grow up feeling ashamed of their parents and their history because of the new meaning it has taken on in Israel. These views, however, have shifted dramatically over the past twenty years. Dozens of the next generations I have spoken to express the feelings that they once had have been replaced with an immense pride in their culture and a deeper respect for the elders of the community, who experience many hardships that go unsaid.

As in December, I took trains that go through the country, passing scenic towns and villages on the way, eventually landing in Kiryat Gat. I would often arrive as the elders finished their morning work in the fields, sitting around a table eating injera and drinking buna. Switching from Hebrew to Amharic, I would piece together the conversations as best I could. I would help

clean up the food when they finished and prepare for the groups of students and adults that arrive in the afternoon. The groups come and are met with buna and dabo, two staples of Ethiopian culture, where they savor the flavors and learn about the community. Just as my group some years before, I would help the groups dress up in Ethiopian clothing and lead them in Ethiopian dances with Geula¹⁰ and Tigist. Tigist has worked at the village for many years, but only in December did we become close.

Tigist is the mother of six children and two grandchildren and came to Israel by plane on Operation Solomon. We spent many days together at the kfar and in her home, where she shared her life and memories with me. She spends long days working and taking care of her family, running to catch the bus from the kfar to school meetings for her children. Her life is dedicated to others; she embodies selflessness and patience, hence her name in Amharic meaning patience. Moshe also works at the kfar, tending to the agriculture and assisting the elders. He is a quiet man who smiles often and has eight children and a wife whom he loves dearly. He often offered me the food he grows, stuffing peppers into a bag for me to take home after the days of volunteering. One time, he drove Tigist and I back to her house, and I saw above his dashboard dozens of red peppers sitting quietly, waiting to be eaten.

After a day of volunteering, I went home with Geula, who asked if I was hungry. She fed me soup with the spices and vegetables grown in the kfar mixed with couscous. This dish directly blends Ethiopian and Israeli culture through food ritual, mixing a soup with Ethiopian elements and couscous, which is a common dish in Israel¹¹. I asked her if her children speak Amharic, to which she replied no, and added “But my son loves injera.” Such a statement could

¹⁰ All names besides Geula in this section are pseudonyms.

¹¹ The dish originates from North Africa and was therefore involved in food rituals of the Mizrahi Jews for centuries and has been adopted by Israeli culture.

have been mentioned for a variety of reasons, one of which I interpret as expressing that although he does not know the language, he does embrace other aspects of the culture. She told me about the parts of the kfar that I have not seen: there are many programs and events held at the kfar, like ritual ceremonies such as henna, as well as courses for the next generations to connect to their identity. Geula pointed out the importance of this work with the next generations: “To learn more about their own family history.” Despite the age difference, Geula and I became good friends, sharing our lives and our love for poetry with each other.

I met Simcha for the first time that summer, as she began her work at the kfar. Coming from Ashkelon and amidst other jobs, she went weekly to contribute to the mission of the village. Simcha’s family is different from others: her father passed away, and her mother suffers from a neurological disorder, so her grandmother raised her and her brother. Along with work and caring for her family, she attends university and other programs outside of it, planning for her future. Both her uncle and her grandpa have the role of Kes in the community, and Simcha speaks Amharic perfectly, which she credits to her grandma. Because of the lack of ability in the house, Simcha knows and makes injera. She is one of the only young adults in the community I know that makes injera.

Simcha is the only younger person of the community, besides Yafa, that I had ever seen in the village, and unlike Yafa, she was not there to visit but to work. I asked her why she was there: “Of course it is for the money, but the village has a purpose. Because I’m an Ethiopian it is more important to me. It’s important. Maybe if it was another museum, I wouldn’t care like that.” She led her own groups in the village and translated Geula’s Hebrew into English for the English-speaking groups. I often watched her struggle, looking for the right words. I told her it is not the exact words, but the meanings that matter. She replied, “I won’t translate incorrectly to

make it easier for myself. If they come, they need to understand everything she says.” This response was the moment I realized just how much she cares about the culture and the story that Geula tells. To see an individual of the next generations in Israel with such passion about the community brought a feeling of warmth to my heart.

Simcha works diligently first for her family, and then for both her own future and the future of her community. She moves with passion and empathy in a world that requires her to work very hard to succeed, and she does so beautifully.

One day of volunteering, Simcha, Tigist, and I were speaking about children. I told them that I only wanted one, met with faces of shock. “You must have more than one,” Tigist told me with certainty. Simcha replied, “I want seven. It is a gift from Hashem.” “Seven is a lot, Simcha. Are you sure?” I replied. She thought it over and then changed her answer to five or six. They both agreed that Jewish women should have as many children as Hashem will let them. This is deeply rooted in religious understandings of reproduction, as one of the prominent commandments in the Torah is to “be fruitful and multiply¹².” It makes sense then that Tigist and Simcha express this viewpoint. Although Simcha is young, she is religious and was raised by her grandma, who embodies traditional values.

The work of both Balinjera and Kfar Beta Israel serve as vessels of producing and sharing knowledge, heritage, and love. These spaces hold a deep importance not just for the Ethiopian Jewish community, but also Israeli society at large, shedding light on the value of learning about all communities present in Israel. These are places where culture isn’t just remembered and appreciated but lived. In every sense, these spheres embody cultural resilience and beauty.

¹² Genesis 1:28

Shabbat

“There is a word that is seldom said, a word for an emotion almost too deep to be expressed: the love of the Sabbath.” Rabbi A. J. Heschel

The Sabbath. In six days, Hashem created the world, and on the seventh day, Hashem rested. Shabbat is the Jews’ day of rest. Candles are lit Friday evening before sundown, and they remain lit until the last drop of wax collapses, as the flame goes out sometime in the night. Prayer accompanies feelings of gratitude and relief. Friday evening to Saturday evening, many Jews unplug from the world: there is no driving, no electronics, no buying, no work, etc. In his book *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel sums up the abstinence of Shabbat: “On the Sabbath we live, as it were, *independent of technical civilization*: we abstain primarily from any activity that aims at remaking or reshaping the things of space” (Heschel 1951, 28). It is the time to be present in the eternal essence of the world.

Shabbat changed the scope of my fieldwork, in that from Friday afternoon to Saturday evening after sundown, I had no public transportation. In Israel, largely everything closes on Shabbat (except Tel Aviv, which is known for its secularism, along with some bars and convenience stores in other areas). I had to rely solely on public scooters, taxis, and secular friends with cars (uncommon). This gave me the opportunity to embrace Shabbat for what it is, and in Shabbat I learned more about what Shabbat means and brings to individuals, families, and myself. Instead of Friday evening beginning the weekend, Thursday evening serves this purpose in Israeli society because Friday morning must be freed to prepare for Shabbat. In this way,

Sunday is the beginning of the work week. On Friday, the majority of people work/go to school half of the day or abstain from work.

Although there is a spectrum of Jews with many different backgrounds, rituals, and ways of performing and exhibiting Judaism in Israel, there is a strong divide between secular Jews and religious Jews. A good friend of mine that I met at an Ethiopian club helped me to realize the middle way even in Israel. She explained that she is not religious anymore, but that she prays every day and kisses the mezuzah on every door. She does not cover her shoulders as is custom by both Ethiopian and Jewish tradition, yet she exhibits other signs of religiosity, or what is called in Hebrew Tzedek, meaning righteousness. Jews are often perceived as fitting into two categories: secular or ultra-orthodox. Most of the Jews in Israel, however, do not fit neatly into either category, underscoring the complexity of the Jewish condition: Israel and Judaism are a blend of cultures and ways of being, taking on different forms for each individual.

The work of not generalizing certain cultures and communities is work that must be learned, considering the hegemony has been programmed through the implementation of stereotypes. Within the generations of Israeli Jews (including Beta Israel), it is common to find many people in a somewhat liminal position of being neither secular nor religious. For instance, a large number of Jews in Israel have Shabbat dinner on Friday evening and gather on holidays. This might not necessarily be because of the religious aspect of Judaism, but because of the cultural aspect. A few of my friends in the community keep Shabbat every week, yet they do not pray every day or wear 'modest' clothing. In this light, Shabbat is a generational Jewish tradition which they uphold for their belief in Hashem, the joy of having a day of rest and time with family, or both. The Beta Israel no longer observes Shabbat in a uniform manner, as the shifting

norms and values in Israeli culture have presented different ways of life, both forced and voluntary.

Time can be viewed in the community through the lens of buna and the limited amount of time to sit and drink buna in Israel, as well as the shift to the electric coffee grinder. The shift of time regarding Shabbat also had a large impact on the community. Shabbat in Ethiopia was observed strictly by the whole community. It was easy to observe because their life in Ethiopia revolved around Judaism. Time was perceived through a religious Jewish lens, meaning that Shabbat was part of the clock, the sunset guiding them as the alarm clock guides the West. “Time was thought, but more often celebrated, as a sequence of specific events that befall a chosen people” (Fabian and Bunzl 2014, 2). Although the Israeli government requires stores and businesses to close on Shabbat, many people in the Beta Israel community cannot afford the day to rest, so many work.

There is no universal understanding of time; time exists within each culture, each world to which it belongs. Western understandings of time misrepresent time as a way of justifying and defining such notions of the ‘Orient’ and ‘Occident,’ made to divide instead of unite. The immigration to Israel and the assimilation of Ethiopians Jews into society required a shift in temporal thought, a shift in the way in which their way of life was understood. In this light, epistemologies of time were exploited, making work and the accumulation of money to survive a necessity, while Shabbat became something that, for many, can no longer be put at the forefront of one’s life.

Israel’s understanding of time coincides with that of the West, with its fast pace. Time has been manipulated in a way that benefits the capitalist agenda. “Civilization, evolution, development, acculturation, modernization (and their cousins, industrialization, urbanization) are

all terms whose conceptual content derives, in ways that can be specified, from evolutionary Time. They all have an epistemological dimension apart from whatever ethical, or unethical, intentions they may express” (Fabian and Bunzl 2014, 17). Such an impact is easy to trace in the lives of the Beta Israel. My friend’s mother kept Shabbat strictly in Ethiopia, as did most of the community, but she no longer keeps Shabbat, as she has to work overnight shifts in the hospital. Correspondingly, many of my friends' parents do not keep Shabbat because they must work. One elder tells me, “We don’t keep Shabbat like we did in Ethiopia, but slowly we will all come back to our roots.”

After meeting and speaking with dozens of Ethiopian Israeli young adults, I have concluded that there are more Beta Israel young adults that are not *shomer shabbat*, that is, they do not keep Shabbat in the traditional manner. However, based on the fieldwork I have done, I believe the percentages are close and ever changing, suggesting a complex split between those who are *shomer shabbat* and those who enjoy more the cultural aspects of Judaism, such as being with family. What I can state with confidence is that the majority of Beta Israel individuals in Israel have, at some point, observed Shabbat. These observations underscore the complex ways in which Ethiopian Jewish young adults navigate their religious and cultural identities within Israeli society, reflecting their unique experiences and environments.

First Shabbat

The first Shabbat I celebrated this past summer with the Beta Israel community was with a married couple with two small children. My friend and I arrived late to a quiet, dark apartment building in a small neighborhood outside of Tel Aviv. We walked up the stairs, as there was no elevator, to the very top, and knocked on the door on the left. A woman who looked no older

than thirty, with two braids and a mickey mouse shirt, invited us inside her home cheerfully. I handed her a bottle of *Arak*¹³, a Middle Eastern liquor that is also present in Ethiopia, as it is rude to come empty-handed. We sat at the table as I looked around: a large portrait of her and her husband in a grassy meadow, a spoon-like figure hanging next to it with a Hebrew prayer for the home written on it, a large hanging with the Ethiopian alphabet on it, which at the bottom read, in faulty English: “Long live Ethiopian!”

The woman, Sara, picked up a *siddur*, a Jewish prayer book, and began the *Kiddush*, the blessing over wine. I was taken aback, as it is usually the man of the house who does Kiddush. She finished the prayer as we said amen in unison. She first brought out challah (Jewish braided bread), with which we did *Hamotzi* (the prayer over the bread). She then broke off a piece of the bread, first eating a piece, then giving one to her husband, and then to my friend and me.

Ayib and Fitfit were then brought to the table, neither of which I had ever heard of. Fitfit was made by each individual by breaking the injera into small pieces and mixing it into a salad. Then Ayib, Ethiopian cheese homemade by Sara, was put into it as well. It has a very sour taste, which I was not a fan of, but what a special experience to learn about these foods! When she brought out the injera, with which to eat the main course of meat, the first bite was more amazing than I could’ve imagined. I asked her immediately how she did it, eager to make it myself. She happily taught me how to make injera and showed me the different spices she had to make popular dishes such as shiro and gomen (dishes of chickpeas and collard greens). Since my first time eating injera some years ago after Batel introduced me to it, I have found Ethiopian restaurants in every city that I go to in the U.S.

¹³ Arak has become a staple of Ethiopian culture, present at every household that I was invited. There are always multiple bottles of Arak.

Teff is the grain from which injera is made. There are Ethiopian Israeli entrepreneurs that import and sell teff from Ethiopia. The elder women in the community buy teff in large sacks at a time, of either twenty-five or fifty kilograms, and although the bags are large, they only last about two weeks because of the size of the families and the demand for injera in the house. The grain is sifted by the women thoroughly to take out any bugs and debris that could build up from Ethiopia to Israel¹⁴. It is then poured into a large bowl or bucket and mixed with cold water, which is kneaded together. This process takes an immense strength to knead the two materials together, which becomes very heavy and requires some time. The work put into making injera and preserving one of the staples of Ethiopian culture is one of the reasons the elderly women in the community are so highly honored and respected. It is then left to ferment for about three to four days. After this time, hot water is then mixed into the dough and kneaded again. After another few hours of sitting, the mixture is ready to cook.

The *mitad* is the name of the machine used to cook the injera once it's fermented, and the mixture is poured on it in a circular motion to create a large circle around the size of a plate. The mitad itself is circular, creating the perfect shape for a plate and for storage in the mosev. The liquid is poured and begins to bubble, which means it is ready to flip. Once it has been cooked thoroughly and has a tan color, it is ready to be eaten. One of the elders told me how she loves warm injera the best, which is why she always makes it fresh every day. Such an endeavor requires each of the steps of the process to be completed almost every day to ensure there will always be more for the next.

Although I have never seen or heard of injera itself being made by a man, I do have one male friend, Jacob, who can make some of the dishes that go along with it. Over the summer, he

¹⁴ I have watched women sift through the teff many a time, and there is usually debris, and the bugs that appear occasionally resemble small flies.

made me Doro Wot, while his mom made the injera, blurring the hegemonic roles of gender in Ethiopian culture while highlighting the relationship between mother and son in this context to create something traditional, and to do it together. One night, a friend exclaimed “Why is injera not a staple of Israel?” She continued, explaining, “We are here so long, and they pick sushi and not injera.” The underlying sentiments stem from her appreciation of the food that she does not see from others in Israeli society. As an Israeli, she is proud of her identity, but she feels like Israel does not appreciate her for her Ethiopian identity as well. This is the only instance that I heard someone express frustration against the larger Israeli society regarding food practice. Nevertheless, volunteering at Balinjera I experienced many instances of non-Ethiopian customers asking for forks and spoons to eat injera, which is supposed to be traditionally eaten with the hands. Some expressed disgust with the traditional practice, while others simply preferred what they were used to.

Sara, her husband, and I got to know each other, switching off between Hebrew and English to keep the conversation afloat. We talked about her two sleeping children whom she loves more than anything. “Being a mom is the best thing in the world,” she said, a smile in her eyes. As her youngest is less than a month old and her first under five, the children take up most of her time. Her husband was called into the reserves after October seventh to fight against Hamas in Gaza, and Sara was left alone with the children for many months, worried sick about her husband. He is viewed by the family as their hero. I want to propose that she is the hero: two young children, one who was in her stomach at the time that he left, and she did not pause, but adapted and took care of her children with pleasure and love. This can be compared to the hundreds of mothers that walked through the Ethiopian and Sudanese deserts, many of them pregnant and with other small children on their backs and walking next to them. They continued

to adapt, make meaning of their lives, and persevere with the end goal of living in Jerusalem. She not only embodies what it means to be a strong mother and a wife but exemplifies the strength and courage of her own mother and many others before her.

During the dinner, Sara brought out the Arak and handed it to her husband, who poured us all a shot. Before he poured, however, he put a few drops of Arak in his hand, flicking it behind his back, and then to the other three corners of the house. I did not understand what was happening, looking at them all in shock and amazement, to which they laughed heartily. Sara explained to me the cultural significance of such a ritual: it is an Ethiopian tradition practiced to ward off evil spirits. The act of flicking liquor to each corner of the house can be said to honor spirits and protect the home, underscoring the notion that Ethiopian ritual has indeed been preserved in Israel. During my fieldwork, I only witnessed this ritual one other time, despite being around Arak frequently. Yet, the fact that this particular family chose to perform it speaks volumes about their identity and the deep-rooted value they place on preserving their cultural heritage.

After dinner, Sara asked us if we wanted buna. Before we had a chance to answer, she had already gotten up to get it. The buna ritual is one of the most important rituals in Ethiopian culture. Buna, directly translating to coffee in Amharic, holds a very special significance to the community, as coffee originated in Ethiopia and has been a staple of the culture for generations.

The buna ritual is a ceremony almost always led and performed by an Ethiopian woman, though I have seen a man grind up the coffee beans one time. The process in Israel is different from that in Ethiopia because such a ritual evolves and adapts to the change in landscape and resources. For example, buna in Israel starts by buying the beans from an Ethiopian market,

because the coffee beans cannot be grown in the conditions of cities where people live¹⁵. I will explain the process of buna in Israel, while also emphasizing that Beta Israel is not a monolith, and therefore there are certain aspects of buna that appear different in specific families and communities in Israel. From my personal experience and the information from interlocutors, I present the following, as occurring in the house of Sara one evening.

Sara grabbed the beans from a drawer and cooked them in a pan on the stove, as if eggs on a skillet. The beans were shaken around the pan, evenly distributed to ensure they were roasted thoroughly. The shaking of the pan led to a very strong and special smell that began to fill the household, almost like a *shofar*¹⁶, calling for all inhabitants to join. Before the beans were turned into coffee, she brought the pan to the table, wafting the “delicious scent” into the nose of each person present (Howard, 88). It is part of the ritual to waft with one’s own hand the scents of buna, illustrating both appreciation and excitement.

The beans are then traditionally pounded by hand using a mortar and a pestle. This stage of the ritual is where I have seen a husband grind the beans as his wife set up the cups for the guests. In contrast to the traditional grinding of the beans by hand, there are many families in Israel that now use an electric coffee grinder, as I saw in many households including Sara’s, to grind the beans. The use of the grinder is an adaptation to the change in the ontological order of time. In the villages in Ethiopia, time was understood differently. Buna was traditionally performed multiple times a day in Ethiopia, but the fast pace of Western society in Israel calls for other things, such as working long hours, to take up that time. “Buna thus becomes a self-consciously ‘cultural’ practice that engenders a sense of comfortable familiarity in the face of

¹⁵ The one place I know of that buna is grown in Israel is Kfar Beta Israel.

¹⁶ A shofar is the horn of a kosher animal, usually that of a lam, blown most commonly on the holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

rapid change, a context in which it comes to stand for “being Ethiopian” (Gershon and Taylor 2008). Professor Don Seeman in his analysis of buna states, “Because of its centrality to this widespread construct, however, buna practice may also come to be perceived by at least some Ethiopians as standing in tension with coded practices of modernity that are considered to be “Western” or, in the context of my research, ‘Israeli’ by contrast” (Seeman 2016, 738). Dozens of elders have expressed on multiple occasions that time moved slower in Ethiopia. There was more time to be present and to relax, unlike the busyness of Israeli society. This means there was more time and ease to make buna. In this way, the utilization of the coffee grinder is time-efficient, and it also saves energy.

Instead of a traditional *jebena*, which is commonly used to store and pour the buna, a coffee kettle was brought out, holding the buna just as well. A *rekabot* recently gifted from a cousin visiting Ethiopia was brought out, one of the most beautiful I had ever seen (pictured below). In the center of the *rekabot* is a small sculpture with a long neck, raised with a shallow space in the middle, from which incense created a strong, earthly smell. It mixed well with the buna, turning into a smell of community, heritage, and perseverance. We were each given *sini*¹⁷ as Sara poured us the first cup.

¹⁷ The Amharic word for cup specifically in the context of the buna ritual.



Figure 3. The rekabot at Sara's home, with the spoon and alphabet visible. Picture by Kaela Goldstein.

At Shabbat dinner, I did not use my phone as is customary because this family keeps Shabbat. Without the phone as a guide, time flew as laughter filled the room, mixed with the haziness from injera and shots of Arak. Time is of utmost importance to the essence of Shabbat. “The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space” (Heschel 1951, 10). I quickly checked my phone under the table to find it was almost midnight. I told my friend we needed to go, who explained that it is impossible to leave without drinking three cups of buna. I looked at the half full first cup in angst, as the coffee is so strong, it is not something that can be swallowed fast. It is something that is sipped and enjoyed, centering as the *rekabot* around the present moment, around community, an “instance of commensality” (Howard 2018, 84). I accepted the

opportunity to learn and to spend time with this family, and I enjoyed my last two and a half cups, talking about topics such as time abroad, family and kin in the community, culture, and politics.

After the third *sini* of *buna* was finished by all, I was told that it was time to bless Sara. I wondered if I was missing something in the Hebrew translation, confused as to what was expected of me. They explained that everyone who drank the *buna* that Sara made was now responsible to give her a blessing, as she did for us. Her husband and my friend both took turns expressing their gratitude and sending prayers of goodness to her. It came to my turn, and in my broken Hebrew, I thanked her not only for the *buna*, but for welcoming me into her home as a stranger, for teaching me about Ethiopian food ritual with an open and patient heart, and for a very meaningful and impactful Shabbat. “The most important part of the ceremony is to drink three cups (*Abol*, *Tona*, and *Baraka*)—by the third cup, you have received the blessing of your host (“*Baraka*” means blessing in Amharic, Hebrew, and Arabic)” (Thrumston 2014). This last ritual of blessing led to a great sense of gratitude in the room, a moment of intense vulnerability, as humans so often like to ignore. The *buna* ritual emphasizes the importance of family, of human connection, and of tradition. Sara told me, “*Buna* is not just coffee, it is a ceremony for the children and elders to sit and drink, a time to truly talk with family and friends.” In the same light as Professor Don Seeman, “Learning how to drink *buna* was an early part of my socialization to field-work and eventually became a cherished way of passing time among friends” (Seeman 2015, 735).

First Synagogue

My first time at an Ethiopian Jewish synagogue that summer was with Rivka and Selam. On Friday afternoon, everyone comes home to prepare for Shabbat. My friends don't have work on Friday, so I went over to their house, walking up the stairs past a sleeping kitten, first knocking on Rivka's door.

Walking through the door frame, I was surprised to see three large portraits of (what appeared to be) white men on the walls. Later in the night, I learned the names of these three figures: Baba Sali, Chacham Yosef Chaim (Ben Ish Chai), and Rabbi Ovadia Yosef. Baba Sali was a famous Moroccan Rabbi, whose grave is a place of prayer for many religious Jews. Ben Ish Chai, hailing from Iraq, was well-respected from a very young age for his work in Torah, Kabbalah and Jewish Law, while also working to connect all Jews from different communities and making Torah accessible to all. Similarly, Rabbi Yosef was also a Rabbi originating from Iraq, and served as Israel's Sephardic Chief Rabbi during the time of Operation Solomon and other smaller Aliyot from Ethiopia to Israel. Rivka expressed her admiration for this man, as he was one of the Rabbis that halachically ruled that the Beta Israel are Jewish and can come to Israel under the *Law of Return*, creating huge strides for the community. These portraits highlight the value of Judaism and Torah within the household, and not just Ethiopian Judaism but Orthodox Judaism as a whole, considering none of these figures are Ethiopian.

There was much bustling among Rivka and her sisters, as they tried to finish everything they needed to get done before the sun set and Shabbat began. Rivka's mom lit the candles and waved her hands over her face, bringing the light and warmth of Shabbat onto herself. Rabbi Heschel notes that, "it is the woman who ushers the joy and sets up the most exquisite symbol, light, to dominate the atmosphere of the home" (Heschel 1951, 66). Rivka and I went over and lit candles as well, saying the prayer for lighting the candles.

Rivka and I then walked down the stairs and knocked on Selam's door, and we all walked to the synagogue together. I remember quite vividly the feeling of nervousness going into this new synagogue. I knew it would be nothing like the Conservative Synagogue from home. I asked them about the kes in the synagogue, to which they replied that he died a few years ago and they are without a rabbi. I asked who leads the congregation in prayer, as it is the job of a rabbi, and they explained that different men take over the role.

We took a right outside of their apartment building, took another turn, and walked for about thirty seconds before the synagogue was visible. The outside reads: "בית כנסת שיבת ציון" in big blue letters, which translates to "Return to Zion Synagogue." Zion can be understood as a symbol of the Jewish homeland, more specifically meaning Jerusalem, the place of which the Beta Israel community spent centuries praying to return to. The name appears quite fitting, then, as their dream has come true, and they have a place to worship Hashem in their homeland. Underneath these words in smaller words reads: "קהילת יוצאי אתיופיה" translating to the Ethiopian community, a place of worship specifically for the Beta Israel community.

The front door is for men only, as the genders are separated because it is an orthodox synagogue, so we walked around the side of the synagogue and up the stairs. Right before the stairs is a handwashing station where the girls wash their hands in order to purify themselves before entering the holy space. I did so as well out of respect (now I do it every Shabbat because I feel called to). We walked up the stairs, stepping over a tan-colored welcome mat with a red flower and a shadow of a bird, and entered the door to find about a dozen elderly Ethiopian women, as well as Selam's sister and Rivka's cousin. Besides the two girls and us, everyone else was an elder. While the younger women were wearing 'Western' style modest, mainstream orthodox dresses and skirts, all of the elder women were dressed in kemis, and the men in nice

clothing, as is prescribed by the tradition of Shabbat. One must wear their ‘finest garments’ on such a sacred holy day (Heschel 1951, 54). I was taken aback at how few young adults were present. I admire these young women for showing up every Shabbat, week after week, even while their peers are elsewhere.

We grabbed siddurim from the shelf and took our seats at the front of the balcony. I opened the siddur, taken aback by the fact that it was all written in Hebrew. I then remembered there is no need for English, considering I was surrounded by Israelis.

There was a sheer sheet blocking the women’s vision to the men’s section, although that is where the Torahs are. This sheet presented me with a level of difficulty, because not only could I not see the men to continue learning about the different aspects of an Ethiopian synagogue on Friday evening, but I could not connect to my own Judaism and pray in the way that I am used to. This discomfort, however, must be embraced as a vessel of knowledge and growth; to understand the culture of which I am engulfed.

Selam, perhaps sensing my anxiety and discomfort, leaned forward and moved the sheet, nodding for me to look past it. I felt a tinge of guilt but obeyed, curiously. I peeked over the sheet to find a synagogue similar to most others: rows of seating and a *bima*, a raised platform in the middle for the rabbis and torah readers to stand, all facing the Aron Kodesh, or ‘holy ark’ that contains the Torah. It usually has works of praise written above it, this one written: “שבתֵי ה' לנגד עֵינַי”, translating to “Hashem’s Sabbaths are before my eyes”. Above the Aron Kodesh lies a mosaic storytelling of the Torah, glass symbols such as the shofar, wheat, a scale, and a boat lining the wall, allowing light to seep through them in the daytime and lighting themselves up in the evening. A large chandelier hangs in the center of the synagogue reflecting light, space, and energy.

There were only around two dozen men, enough for a minyan¹⁸, all standing up in front of the benches of seats, some swaying, some leaning against the bench in front of them. I looked around the women's section and saw the elderly women with their two palms out, facing the sky, eyes closed and praying (besides the ones looking at me curiously). They did not have siddurim, I assumed because they cannot read Hebrew at the speed of which the service is going. After speaking with Selam after the service, I was able to learn the following: most Ethiopian elders cannot read Hebrew. They pray within themselves and respond with 'amen' in the places in which the congregation responds. Evidently the siddurim are just a guide to lead one in prayer, so it is not vital that the elders use it.

A young Ethiopian man was leading the prayers, standing on the bima. After some time, he began to speak to the congregation. I recognized the Hebrew, readying my brain to understand what is to come. Selam turned to me and explained that he is giving the *D'var Torah*. Translating literally to 'words of Torah', the D'var Torah is a sermon that is given by a leader of a congregation on the *Parsha*, the weekly Torah portion. It is usually spoken to uplift the congregation through stories from the Torah from which a lesson can be learned.

The man began speaking, but I suddenly couldn't understand a word. I wondered if my Hebrew was really that bad, but then I heard a word that I was positive was in Amharic. I began to listen more attentively. Selam, reading the confusion on my face, explained that he is switching off between Hebrew and Amharic, languages understood by all of the congregation. That made it impossible for me to understand, but what I did learn is that a large shift from Ethiopia to Israel took place.

¹⁸ A minyan in orthodox Judaism is ten Jewish men, and this synagogue is orthodox, as are most in Israel. In less strict sects of Judaism, Jewish women can be included in the ten. Selam told me that women do not count in the minyan because it is the mitzvah of a man. "Women are closer to Hashem, so they don't have to do as much."

This merge of Amharic and Hebrew highlights the two languages that encompass the Beta Israel identity¹⁹. It makes the sermon accessible to both the elders and the younger generations, who are at once preserving their culture and integrating into a new one. With most people in the synagogue being of the first generation, Amharic is a way to include them in the service, at once teaching them about the Torah and making them feel included.

As the service ended, the women got up, saying Shabbat Shalom, a greeting of peace on Shabbat, and left the synagogue. I waited a bit longer, peering over the sheer sheet once again, to find the men going up to the Aron Kodesh as they began to hug and kiss it. An act of hugging and kissing the Torah, considering the older generations see it taboo to show affection in public, is a severe act of intimate devotion. I will argue then that the Torah is not a tangible object, but a spiritual symbol of Hashem, encompassing the presence of the divine. I began to feel uncomfortable, as not only are the women not supposed to see the ark during services, they also do not get to have this intimacy with Hashem that the men do. I expressed my concern to Selam, who immediately told me that it is a matter of modesty, and that after the men leave, women are allowed to go to the Aron Kodesh as well.

As we left the synagogue, and into the dimly lit and quiet night, the girls walked back to their houses, and I went with Selam to hers. We walked into the soft light, into the comfort of her home. I shut the door behind me, noticing the wall covered with magnetic photos of family and friends from different events such as a Bar/Bat Mitzvot, a bris, and many weddings. In almost every house there was either a door or a fridge covered in photographs from top to bottom. I later saw myself on this wall from the Bar Mitzvah we went to together. It felt very special to be on

¹⁹ As do other Ethiopian languages spoken by Ethiopian Jews, with Tigrinya being the next most spoken among the Beta Israel.

this wall. There are many more pictures that sit side by side in front of the TV on a stand, and a symbol of Ethiopia hanging from above.

Selam handed everyone a glass of wine as she recited the Kiddush. She began reciting the opening passages of the Kiddush, praising creation and the holiness of Shabbat, and then she stopped. She looked at her father, who took over and recited the final blessing, the blessing specifically over the wine, and lifted his cup, taking a sip. We all said amen and followed in his lead. I found it confusing that Selam did most of the Kiddush, considering orthodox Judaism usually requests that it is done by a man. She explained to me that her father cannot read Hebrew, and that is why she did the longer part of it, but that he still did the Kiddush, underscoring the importance of the man to complete this task.

He then picked up the challah, saying hamotzi, and breaking off a piece first for himself, then his wife, his children, and I. This concluded the Shabbat prayers for the evening, and Selam shook hands with her mom and said Shabbat Shalom. Her mother and father then shook hands as well. I found myself wondering why they don't show more physical affection, as in my own family, we hug and kiss on Shabbat. The contrast becomes even more nuanced as I recall the men hugging and kissing the Aron Kodesh, yet they are reserved in their physical affection to their families.

Over time, and with a growing sense of cultural relativism, I began to understand that within the Beta Israel community, public affection between men and women is generally considered taboo. Displays of respect and love are more commonly portrayed through the actions one does to provide and lift up their families, displays coming from deeply ingrained cultural values of modesty and respect.

Yet I also noticed signs of change among the younger generations. In my fieldwork I observed that younger people at bars, parties, and on the street showed physical affection such as hugging and kissing, although kissing was not so common. It can also be noted that at the wedding I attended, unlike in mainstream weddings, the man and woman did not kiss, but only hugged. There are many religious Jewish communities in which the bride and groom do not touch at all at their wedding.



Figure 4. Selam's house. Viewed is buna beans in a pan, Arak on the left, and tella, an Ethiopian drink, on the right. Photo taken by Kaela Goldstein.

In this way, the younger generations navigate a sort of balance, both honoring their history and their Ethiopian culture while simultaneously assimilating into the hegemonic norms of Israel, reshaping their identities, and creating a new generation of Ethiopian Jews that have not been seen before. The experiences I witnessed gave me an appreciation for the individuals that make up this community, a generation of individuals who both embrace traditions and adapt in the ways they feel most comfortable in Israel.

Later that evening, I went outside with Selam and Rivka to speak and socialize. Often, some of their siblings, many of whom do not keep Shabbat, all sit together outside and talk at the picnic table below their apartment building. We spoke deeply about Judaism, Shabbat, and the importance of prayer. When I explained to them my connection with the universe, Rivka told me that it could be meaningful to say the *Mode Ani* prayer when I wake up each morning. It is a prayer assigned to the Jew when they awake from sleep, a prayer that expresses gratitude for the soul that has been returned to their body. It is about giving thanks to Hashem for the ability to wake up again and live life with a purpose. Rivka was quite convincing, as I now say the prayer every day when I wake up.

From the first week I met Selam and Rivka, I spent almost every Shabbat with them and their families until the week that I flew back to the States. A few weeks before I left however, Rivka moved to seminary, where she studies Torah with other religious women. Despite her absence, I went often to visit her family, specifically one of her older sisters, Alem, who became a good friend of mine. She is a single mom of three little children. We formed a bond because of her talent of braiding hair, which I so desperately needed without my normal hair products and routine. She happily braided my hair and refused to take any kind of payment.

Alem is the mother of one boy and a set of twins, all under the age of four. The father of her children is not in the picture, hence Alem living with her parents in order to receive help, considering she now has to raise the children by herself. She spends most of her time at the house but leaves occasionally to run errands for her parents and herself, her mom or other family members stepping in to take care of the babies in her absence.

One Shabbat evening, I took a taxi to the neighborhood as usual, stopping first at Alem's house because I knew the children would be going to sleep shortly. I arrived just in time for the

Kiddush, which I was surprised to find Alem reciting at the head of the table, a headwrap covering her hair. She looked up from the siddur, wine in hand, and smiled at me, as my jaw sat open, staring at her in awe and admiration. When she finished, I said, “How religious you are!” She laughed and replied, “I did it because there was no one else to do it.” I realized then that when Rivka moved, and considering none of the other siblings were around, she was the only one in the house who could read Hebrew well enough to lead the Kiddush.

Even though she is not religious, she did the Kiddush out of respect and honor for her parents, who did so much to preserve their Judaism. She is able to comprehend the importance of Judaism as a part of her family's identity, and performs the prayers to honor Shabbat, a time that she too gets off her phone.

A different Friday evening dinner before Rivka left for seminary was an evening full of family and noise. All of her siblings were there, including her brother Shlomi, the other religious sibling, who came with his wife and child from the south for the Sabbath. I walked into the apartment to find him holding a siddur and swaying confidently with his eyes closed as he mumbled a prayer quietly but surely. He wore a suit with a black hat, his payot braided against his scalp by Alem. Bodily symbols such as the black hat/kippah, or a head covering for women, make a strong visible distinction between the religious and the secular in Israel. I forgot that he is most likely *Shomer Negiah*²⁰, meaning he does not touch people of the opposite sex besides family members and his wife. When he finished, though, I mistakenly reached out my hand, as is my custom when meeting someone. He nonetheless took it quickly and politely, shaking and smiling at me. A few of the family members smiled quietly. Perhaps they thought of me as an ignorant American who does not know tradition and did not want to embarrass me.

²⁰ A part of Jewish tradition originating from the Torah prohibiting the touch of someone of the opposite sex on the basis of modesty and respect.

Alem's children and some others ran around the small apartment, spilling toys and running between the legs of adults. "Oyvavoy!" Alem shouted at the kids making a mess. Rivka asked me if I wanted injera or schnitzel²¹. This was the case at largely all of the meals I had at Ethiopian households: there was traditional Ethiopian food, served with injera, and there was some sort of Israeli dish, usually centered around schnitzel or fish. The injera is always made and eaten by the elders, and the Israeli food is always made and eaten by the young adults and children. There is some overlap in this binary of food production and consumption, just as there is sometimes a fusion of both foods together. Food practice on Shabbat is a direct result of immigration and integration into Israeli society. The next generations in Israel always make Israeli food on Shabbat, along with injera, because a lot of them tend to enjoy it and prefer it more than injera. In Ethiopia, injera was the main dish eaten every day, underscoring the change in food preference.

When handing out the food, Rivka's mother referred to her by a different name, a name that is popular among Ethiopian women. Rivka responded, and I looked at her surprisingly. Alem explained that she has two names, an Ethiopian name, and a Hebrew name. Rivka demanded that I call her by her Hebrew name as I showered her Ethiopian name with praise. I was confused why she did not want to be called this name, and she told me, "It's not that I don't like my name, I just want to be called my Jewish name." There is a familiar sentiment among names within many of the next generations in Israel. Around half of the community between ages eighteen to forty introduce themselves to me with Hebrew names, and half with Ethiopian. The Hebrew names were given to many during the immigration to Israel by the Israeli government. Those that introduce themselves with their Hebrew names tell me their Ethiopian

²¹ A Jewish name for breaded chicken breast.

names upon me asking, and many explained that they prefer their Israeli names because of racism and discrimination. In Rivka's case, it could be because of underlying embarrassment or negative perceptions of Ethiopian culture, a preference for being perceived as Israeli rather than Ethiopian, or perhaps the stronger connection she has to her Hebrew name because she is religious.

Rivka and Shlomi passed out all of the food to everyone at the table, and Shlomi began to lead prayers, his voice echoing against the spirits in the walls, a sound produced similar to that of an orthodox rabbi with its riffs and quickness. After dinner was finished, I went downstairs to Selam's house, who told her sisters and I that she wanted to play a boardgame. It was the Israeli version of Chutes and Ladders, written in a Hebrew translation. As it was Shabbat, there were no telephones or TVs, so it is up to the children and adults alike to make fun with what is tangible and real in front of them. It is very common to find Jews around the globe playing board games into dark hours of the night on Shabbat.

Rivka, Selam, and I played with a few of Selam's sisters, each turn leading to laughter and excitement. Before each roll, Selam would say something like "Please/thank you dad (G-d)" or "Shema Yisrael", actively involving Hashem in our board game. Such use of liturgical phrases is quite common in the Ethiopian Jewish community, to the point that months after this summer, I find myself using such phrasing now throughout my daily life. I credit this to the meaning behind such phrases. Abu Lughod offers a similar example during her fieldwork: "The power of speech is evident in this habit, but so is the constancy of God's presence in the everyday" (Abu Lughod, 35). Although such phrases acknowledge the belief in Hashem and more generally the religion of Judaism, they are also part of the everyday language of religious communities.

A bit on language

Language in the context of ethnography is crucial for a variety of reasons, the first being that language is passed on and expressed through the mode of culture. Enculturation, as exhibited by the mere fact that I now use liturgical language in my everyday life, highlights the very idea that when a person is immersed in a particular society or community, they often begin to take up the everyday ritual and mannerisms associated with such culture.

When one is asked how they are doing, it is not unusual to hear the phrase “Baruch Hashem”, meaning “praise/thank Hashem”. This is similar to the Arabic language, with the response being “Alhumdulillah” meaning the same.²² This is replaced by the more Western responses of “fine” or “good” and gives praise to the creator of the world. Another very frequently said phrase is “Bezrat Hashem” which translates to “with G-d’s help”. This phrase is said before something is to happen, underscoring that with the help of the creator, it will be. This could be anything from the next time you will meet someone, to a wish for world peace, to a hope for marriage. When I was asked the question if I will make Aliyah, I always replied with this phrase, which was either met with the phrase repeated back to me or a smile and nod of approval. Such phrases are more common among religious Jews, but they do tend to penetrate Israeli society more broadly.

Just as in the Chutes and Ladders game on Shabbat, religious phrases are a part of the regular understanding of language for this community. Abu-Lughod’s experience with Bedouin women is like that of mine with Beta Israel in that, “religious references saturate women’s language as well. Some women use oaths almost unthinkingly to strengthen the effect of their stories, swearing by God and by local saints whose tombs are well known. Most women use

²² I compare Hebrew to Arabic here to show a similarity between the languages in their affects and cultural underpinnings.

standard religious phrases at appropriate moments” (Abu-Lughod 1993, 35). The power of language to create an affect within the listeners is something that I took notice of quite often. As I started spending more time with Rivka, Selam, and their families, I began to use the same liturgical linguistics with them, which I did not turn off around others. I would then reply to questions or statements with these phrases with more secular friends in the community, and was met with faces of surprise, shock, or astonishment. Because of the language I used, it became evident to those around me that I was becoming more religious.

Although I did not often spend the night during Shabbat, I would come back the next day to hang out with people who kept Shabbat on Saturday. If the interlocutors kept Shabbat, the meeting was something that had to be planned before, considering they do not use phones on the holiday. One Saturday afternoon, I went to Rivka’s house, knocking on the door to find her reading the Parsha of the week at the dining room table.

Afterwards, she prayed for the rest of the day. She said prayers before and after she ate, after the bathroom, during each prescribed time of prayer during the day, and somehow in between these occasions. She prayed so fast that her mouth could not keep up and the words became mumbled. She checked the clock and continued to pray. She yawned mid-prayer, yet the words did not cease to come from her mouth. The prayer replaced her breath, a natural rhythm of praise to the Creator. At one point, she faced her palms towards the sky as she continued to pray, and I saw then, for just a second, her mother in synagogue, praying with her palms up and closing her eyes.

Shabbat is a holy day deeply embedded into Israeli Jewish society, giving the holiday many different forms and ways of being. Shabbat cannot be ignored considering the public transportation shuts off, and everyone in the Beta Israel community knows *at least* five people

that keep Shabbat. Secular Ethiopian Jews, however, are becoming more and more common as the next generations begin to grow up in the secular frameworks of Israel, being exposed to the option of not being religious and finding it appealing. Despite this, many secular Jews do stop by families' houses for dinner on Friday evenings, even if they do not believe in Hashem or keep the holy day as is traditionally prescribed.

At an Ethiopian run bar in Israel, in a mixed city ²³with many Ethiopian Jews, I sat and talked with a woman who explained the transition of her sister from secular to religious. She said that her sister began to feel closer to religion because it brings her closer to her family. Shabbat is centered around family; a time to spend at home. Adults and young adults often travel from all over the country back to their homes for the weekend. Many of my friends' siblings, married with kids, come from other towns back home, leading to a very lively (and often crowded) atmosphere. I have witnessed quite often apartments with only two bedrooms that somehow always make room for everyone, with many children sleeping together, on the couch, and on mattresses laid across the living room. Despite the crowded conditions, I was always invited to stay the night as well.

The overcrowding, as I mentioned, leads to people sleeping on the couches and the floor. Rivka's mom, the many weeks I was over for Shabbat, always slept on the couch. Rivka and I tippy toed back in the house one night after sitting outside, her mom sleeping soundly next to her little cousin. I asked her why her mom does not sleep in her bed with her husband. She replied that whenever someone sleeps on the couch in her home, she sleeps there as well out of respect. I watch the two of them in a deep sleep, small blankets covering them. The importance of respect

²³ Mixed cities refer to cities in Israel that have a variety of diversity, being Israeli Arabs, Jews, and often Christians and Hindus as well. Some of the most popular are Akko, Haifa, Jaffa, and Tel Aviv. The city I refer to here is smaller, which I keep unnamed at the request of interlocutors.

is a pillar under which her mother conducts her daily life, even in her elder age when a bed would suit her much better. Such aspects of respect have been passed down to her children, as Rivka is one of the most loving and selfless people I know.

The Wedding

I admire Ethiopian culture very much, and considering I have many friends and acquaintances on social media, I see the videos of weddings and other events every week. I watch in awe and envy at the rituals, the joy, and the different aspects of the culture that I have read so much about but have not gotten to see and experience in person. My good friend, Jacob, knows how much I envy all of the celebrations, and offered to take me to a wedding with him. I happily agreed.

We dressed up, me with a polka dot dress covering my shoulders and going down to my knees, unsure how religious the people will be. We drove to Petach Tikva and walked into a beautiful space with greenery everywhere: flowers, grass, and trees. There were two bars, crowded with people, and couches and high tables with chairs waiting to be filled. Jacob explained to me that this is one of the more high-end weddings, which makes sense considering that both the bride and groom work in the high-tech industry.

I followed him inside where he stopped at the entrance and grabbed an envelope. He wrote something down and put money inside, then slid it into a big black box, called a *kupa*. There were many people surrounding the box doing the same, with one man standing next to it, guarding it. This man is of high respect to the family, as he is someone they trust to watch over the large sum of money that was to be collected in the box throughout the wedding. I was surprised that all the gifts were in the form of money.

Jacob told me multiple times about how he no longer enjoys going to weddings and events of the sort because it has become a transaction. Weddings keep becoming more and more expensive, which means the families expect more money in the envelopes. He said it becomes

less about the celebration and more about the gifts; people invite distant relatives, neighbors, and coworkers, with the goal of furthering the transaction of currency between them. If one is invited to a wedding, it is expected that the invitation is returned, to continue the flow of money from one family to the next.

While he was writing in the envelope, I got my first look around and immediately teared up at the sight of the Ethiopian elderly women in kemis. A kemis is a traditional Ethiopian dress with beautiful fabrics filled with color and meaning. It symbolizes pride and unity within the community and is seen as a staple of immense beauty. The kemis is very commonly worn in Ethiopia and among the elderly Beta Israel women in Israel during Shabbat, holidays, and special occasions, but I have yet to see a young Ethiopian woman wear a kemis at an event besides the henna ceremony, which I have only seen and heard about on social media and through friends.



Figure 5. A kemis shop next to the central bus station in Tel Aviv. Photo taken by Kae Goldstein.

The hair of the older women was also in a specific and unique braiding pattern, called ‘Sheruba’ in Amharic, that is popular in Ethiopian culture. There are many different styles, but each consists of dozens of small cornrows, with hair left out naturally in the back. If the elderly women do not have this style, then their hair is covered in a wrap, called maharem in Amharic, or mitpachat in Hebrew, that is often colorful and patterned, symbolizing modesty and often marriage. (It is Jewish tradition to cover your hair if you are a woman once you marry, which is often executed in the form of different head wraps or wigs.) Bright greens, blues, and purples flatter the kemis the women wear.

The rest of the Ethiopian women were wearing standard ‘Western’ clothing. Dresses, skirts, and dress pants of various degrees. Some women with their shoulders out, some covered head to toe, with an entire spectrum of religion fanning the wedding. Each outfit of the women could be said to show a little about how religious the individual is. My friend Malka wore a tube top that does not cover the shoulders, while a woman she knew wore a dress covering to her wrists and ankles, a matching scarf covering her hair. Such vast differences in clothing appear to tell the outsider a bit about the person. Covering her head, she is most likely married, and her modesty illustrates a strict observance of Judaism. Malka on the other hand, will be assumed to be secular and unmarried. These assumptions are not always correct, but nevertheless, it is how the elders will perceive them.

Knowing this information, it becomes evident that it is possible that the wearing of the kemis will die out with the older generation. Despite the fact that the younger women do not wear them, they constantly post their mothers and aunts on social media, with admirable remarks about their beauty. This underscores that although they do not wear the kemis themselves, they nevertheless admire and respect their elders that do and the significance of the clothing itself.

Such marked distinctions in clothing are new to the culture in Israel; in Ethiopia, the community was uniform, with women and men dressed in the modest wear prescribed as acceptable by the community. This has changed with the immigration to Israel, with the next generations growing up in a society with many different cultures. The disapproval of immodest clothing is seen in the faces and the comments of the elder women, but it is nevertheless accepted overall as the years go on and the strict norms and values of the community experience a Western influence. The evolution of the Beta Israel culture is seen through each individual in the community. As there is less homogeneity in self-perception and worldview, different ideas become accepted.

The elder men wore classic suits associated with more formal ritual, although not traditional Ethiopian clothing, while the younger men wore formal and informal clothing alike. Informal clothing is often shirts of expensive brands with jeans, khakis, or cargo pants. A majority of the men wore white. Both Jacob and Malka dress in ways that are frequently regarded as taboo by the elders: Jacob with his shirts unbuttoned and never a kippah, and Malka with skin showing and pants. They are considered by the elders as ‘nontraditional’. They no longer have close ties to religion, but nonetheless they are a part of the Beta Israel community. This illustrates a representation of change in values: they still hold some values of the community, but they don’t dress in the ways the elders prefer.

As people got their drinks and socialized, everyone began gathering towards the *Chuppah*, the covering under which a Jewish couple stands for their wedding ceremony. This Chuppah was made of four poles holding together a ceiling of white roses, green leaves poking out from under them. White gossamer sheets held the poles, lovely and delicate. The *Kes*, the highly honored Ethiopian Jewish priest/religious leader, began to set up under the Chuppah. He

was wearing a suit with a white head covering, similar to a turban, adhering to traditional wear of the Kes. He poured the Kiddush cup and spoke with some of the elders under the Chuppah, who were undoubtedly family of the bride and groom. Everyone turned around as music began to play, and the groom, arm in arm with his parents on either side of him, appeared behind a crowd of people, walking towards the Chuppah. Everyone began to clap and cheer, the music drowned out by the sound of joy and celebration.

Next, two little boys with the rings and three flower girls walked down the aisle. People cheered them on as they walked down, smiling and waving nervously at the crowd. The song “Perfect” by Ed Sheeran then began to play: “We were just kids when we fell in love, not knowing what it was...” The bride came out, standing between her parents, smiling exuberantly. She wore a fitted white lace dress that went down to her feet, strapless with her straightened hair covering her shoulders, a veil flowing from the top of her head in the calm breeze. The groom went to meet her outside of the Chuppah and lifted the veil to cover her face. They held hands and walked into the Chuppah, the male family members on the side of the groom and the women to the bride, and the Kes began the ceremony.

It is important to note that both the bride and the groom are of Ethiopian descent, yet it is not uncommon to see that one or the other is that of a different descent (almost always both are Jewish, but the other would be either Ashkenazi or Sephardic), which would have changed the different rituals and dynamics involved in the wedding.

Everyone fell silent as the voice of the Kes sanctified the love of the newly wedded couple. The Kes in Ethiopia was held in the highest regard, much like other Rabbis in other Jewish communities, because they hold a sacred position within Judaism that connects the divine with the community. The Kes in Ethiopia was not only a spiritual leader but also held significant

authority, both religiously and socially. They not only guided the community and preserved ancient Jewish traditions, but protected the community from harm from Ethiopian non-Jewish neighbors and led the path to Jerusalem.

Danny Adeno Abebe, an Ethiopian Jew who wrote an incredible account of his experiences both in Ethiopia and Israel, explains that the Kes was also a judge in his community. So much of a judge that when the community wanted to start getting educated in larger cities of Ethiopia, he put a stop to it with the reasoning that it was a “gateway to assimilation” (Abebe 2021, 43). In this way, it was most important to the Kes to preserve Judaism. In Abebe’s narrative, he explains that there was no Kes in his village, so one from a nearby village would come on holidays and other occasions. He tells a particular story of a Kes arriving from a nearby village on a mule, symbolizing his high status. Before entering the community, he bathed in the *Mikveh*, or the Jewish ritual bath, because he had shaken hands with Christian people. He did this because he had to arrive “pure” to the Jewish village. He blessed everyone and was served the finest foods (Abebe 2021, 44).

An interlocutor of age twenty told me that his father was a Kes but let go of the role when he came to Israel because he had to work long hours to provide for the family. He explained, “My dad is still very religious, but it is hard.” Another interlocutor, age twenty-two, told me, “The kes, the role of the kes, is kind of disappearing. They had so much power and meaning in Ethiopia and now they came here, and a lot of young people wanted to fit in and left Ethiopian traditions.” She explained further that she believes there will not be a kes in a few generations.

On the other hand, others see it as something that will continue forever. According to multiple elders in the community, this generation of kes are currently mentoring and teaching dozens of young adult men to continue the role of the kes, with one or two young men becoming

a kes every year. This being said, there are some kes that were born in Israel and continue to uphold this part of the Beta Israel culture in Israel. Unlike the kes in Ethiopia, the kes in Israel is not seen as a rabbi, so they do not perform all ceremonies and rituals associated with Judaism. One interlocutor explained to me that the main role of the kes in public spaces in Israel is performing prayers at funerals. Something of importance to note is that there is no female kes. Just as it is considered taboo in Orthodox Jewish communities to have female rabbis (although constantly being contested and women do perform major roles as the Rabbanit), the Beta Israel do not mention the possibility of a female kes.

The Kes at this wedding, Kes Moshe Baruch, is both a Kes and a Rabbi, giving him the ability to perform rituals in all aspects of Jewish society in Israel. He came at a young age to Israel, and his father was a Kes, leading him to fulfill the role when he passed.

The Kes started with common prayers in Hebrew, but the tune is one I had never heard before. The voice of the Kes was strong, passionate, and did melodies of complication with ease. After spending so much time studying the meaning of what a kes is and the struggles they endured both in Ethiopia and in Israel, my respect for them is immense. To hear the prayer of a kes for the first time in person immediately brought tears to my eyes. My friends laughed at me during the ceremony, and I continuously wiped my tears on my arm, for I could not leave the ceremony to get a napkin and risk missing something.

Through the voice of the Kes is a message of perseverance, resilience, and strength. The role of kes went from humiliation at the hands of the Rabbinate in Israel, unable to perform ceremonies in the community because they were not seen as Jewish. This Kes was back under the Chuppah, reclaiming his place as a spiritual leader, sanctifying the union between this

couple. This act is not just a marriage, but an illustration of the resilience of the community in the face of discrimination in Israel.

He prayed very quickly, with people saying, “amen amen”, and I was unable to catch all of the prayers, so Malka began translating for me: “To a good life, a good time together, a good time here in this space... thank Hashem that you are here together...” Soon, neither of us could understand, as he switched his prayers and song to Ge’ez, the liturgical language in Ethiopia. He broke into song, and everyone began clapping, some Ethiopians moving their shoulders back and forth to the rhythm. As I looked around, many Ethiopians, both old and young, had smiles on their faces, as if there is some funny secret that only they knew. It seemed this song was important to all of them. The Kes put one palm towards the sky, the other holding the microphone, beginning to sway to the beat as his voice became stronger with feeling. I heard a woman make the common noise at Ethiopian parties, “lolololo!”

He finished the song and provided no time to clap as he picked up the *Ketubah*, the contract of marriage in Judaism, and switched back to Hebrew, reading it. I realized then his Hebrew was perfect, unlike the other Ethiopian elders that I had met. I assumed that he had to study Hebrew and hold himself to a higher standard in order to continue being a Rabbi in Israel, considering the monumental hoops the community endured just to be taken seriously as Jews.

Siman tov v’mazel tov (translating to good sign and good luck) is a very popular mainstream Jewish song sung at almost all ceremonial events. We all began to sing this song, and everyone clapped and cheered. This joy was followed by the ‘Sheva Brachot’, translating to the seven blessings, the blessings recited at a wedding reaffirming one’s belief in Hashem. More prayers were said that my friend had gotten too lazy to translate for me, and the Kes continued switching from Hebrew to Ge’ez in prayer. The Kes said blessings and the groom repeated after

him. Kiddush was done, from which the groom drank wine first, then handing the glass to the bride to drink.

The end of the ceremony had arrived, as the groom broke a glass under his foot, leading to many cheers. The groom then lifted the veil of the bride, and they hugged. Everyone began walking up to them to give congratulations. It is Jewish ritual for single women to take a sip from the Kiddush cup of wine for luck that they will get married. A few women took sips after congratulating the married couple. I realized that over half the crowd had disappeared right at what I had thought was the most important part of the ceremony, the breaking of the glass. I turned to my friend and asked where they went, and she pointed to the room next to us. We walked over to find everyone seated at the tables inside. "Everyone went to get good seats," she said to me.

The room looked almost like a building, large, glass windows and a huge doorway led to dozens of tables and hundreds of chairs, with a stage and a bar in the back. The tables were segregated by age, I realized, as I was led to a table with the friends of my friend. There were no seats left, as the wedding was overflowing with people. The people working the wedding brought more seats for us and set up a table. My friends told me that this often happens, but "there is always a seat for everyone in the end."

The bride and groom made their first entrance together, walking to the middle of the dance floor as everyone gathered around. The first dance, as traditional in Israeli Jewish weddings, is always a slow song between the newly wedded. Everyone took out their cameras and cheered on the couple as they held each other, surrounded by the people they love, taking in the moment. After this song, a few more Hebrew songs followed, until the music switched to Amharic, and they made their second entrance.

The bride and groom came in jumping, swaying their bodies from side to side, dressed in traditional *kaba*. Behind them, family members jumped in sync, bridesmaids and groomsmen following, the women holding white umbrellas and the men with sashes striped with green, yellow, and red, the colors of the Ethiopian flag, blowing small horns. Everyone in the crowd, old and young alike, shouted in approval, jumping and clapping their hands, following the couple into the middle. After the entrance, a man grabbed the umbrellas and the horns from the family, giving their hands the freedom to move naturally to the hips or in the air, as they jumped and moved their shoulders to the music. Everyone began jumping and forming a circle around the family, moving their hands from side to side. The energy was the most lively it had been all night, as this ritual is one of the most exciting aspects of the Ethiopian wedding. People were clapping and singing, smiles accompanying the special moment.

Kaba is the clothing that accompanies the Ethiopian ritual explained in the second entrance. Kaba are beautiful, royal-looking cloaks worn during a specific part of the wedding in which the bride and groom make an entrance. It is also worn for other special occasions, such as the henna ceremony. Kaba are rented specifically for the wedding and other rituals. The Kaba of this specific bride and groom were quite common: black cloaks worn over their clothing, with a shimmering gold engulfing a third of the robe. Matching ‘crowns’ are completely covered in gold, illustrating the wealth and honor associated with the union, a newly crowned king and queen. Together, the Kaba and crowns embody a blend of cultural pride, the wedding immersed in both historical Ethiopian tradition and a sense of timeless beauty.

During this part of the ceremony, traditional Ethiopian music blasts from the speakers as elders move their bodies as if age did not affect them. *Eskista* is then performed by largely all of the Ethiopians in the building, a traditional Ethiopian dance which translates quite literally to

“dancing shoulders.” Shoulders are rotated forcefully to the music, with the head protruding upwards towards the sky. My friends and I mimic the movements of the elders, many of my friends singing the lyrics to the most well-known Ethiopian songs. Jacob always says he doesn't like Ethiopian music. I look at him then, dancing with passion and force, and say, “I thought you don't like Ethiopian music?” He responds, “It's just my body reacting to the music; it's part of being a habesha.” During this part of the wedding, people took out dollar bills, shekels, and held them up to the foreheads of the bride and groom, along with the immediate family. The more they danced, the more money was placed on their foreheads. In addition to the money that was placed in the box at the entrance, this money was also given to the family. Elders walked up with many bills, from tens to fifties, putting them on the foreheads of the bride, the groom, and their families. It was most significantly exhibited in the relationship between the elders, perhaps symbolizing the joy of preserving Ethiopian tradition through the immigration to Israel.

Some of the elderly women danced alone, on the outskirts of the circles, light smiles accompanying closed eyes, shoulders moving naturally to the rhythms. One of the mothers of my friend looked at us as she danced, so I walked up to her as I began to move my shoulders, much less fluidly than her. We began pushing our shoulders towards each other, laughing, while my friends cheered us on. I felt my eyes begin to water as I thought about the beauty of the night. The elders, who spend long days working, after moving to a country much different than theirs and much different than they could have ever imagined, continue to find joy. The hardships on this night seemed to disappear, as love and tradition overtook the pain. I hugged her then, a hug that for me meant a thousand praises.

The Ethiopian music began to take a different beat, leading the movements of the community to conform. Malka explained to me that the music had changed from Amharic to

Tigrinya, a different language present in Ethiopia. As most of the Beta Israel are either from the Amhara or Tigray regions, it seems fitting that they played both types of music. She told me that she is half Amhara and half Tigray, but even if the people from the wedding are not originally from this region, they play both sets of music for the sake of the culture, ensuring that all of the older habeshas enjoy themselves. The footing in this music is very important, Malka told me, as individuals began to form small circles. Jacob compared this dance to the hora, except with more intricate footing. They moved to the music, their footing synchronized, a secret language of music coming to light.

The many courses at this wedding all consisted of food not related to Ethiopian cuisine. There was hummus, steak, and many salads, as popular in Israeli culture. Sometime after the meal, the father of my friend's friend approached us, greeting me with a kiss. He pulled me aside and asked in Hebrew, "Who are your parents?" I looked at him, confused on why he would ask such a random question, but realized that the community is so small, maybe he thought he knew my family. I replied that my parents are not in the Beta Israel community, and that I am from the U.S. He looked back in astonishment. He asked me if my mother is Jewish, to which I replied yes. He smiled and said, "I want you to meet my son." I walked back to Malka and explained the interaction, to which she laughed with all of the air in her lungs. She explained that he was trying to set me up with his son.

After some time, people sat down again as dessert was served. Hebrew music played as I looked around to find the large room looking much emptier than a few hours before. The last entrance of the bride and groom was sometime around midnight, a light jump in their steps as they walked in with more comfortable clothes. All of the elders had left, and the younger crowd moved into the middle. Afrobeats began roaring from the speakers as Amharic exited the room,

illustrating the change in atmosphere. A photographer walked around the room as he had been the whole night, but this time stopped in front of my friends and I, urging us to smile. We wrapped our arms around each other and posed for the photo. A few minutes later, Malka walked away and returned with a few magnets, each a picture of the photo we had taken moments before. These magnets are a staple of Israel culture, covering doors and fridges of almost all houses in Israel from rituals associated with culture, such as weddings, hennas, birthdays, and Bar/Bat Mitzvot. My heart felt warm as I now had a keepsake to take with me from that night.

Jacob felt it important to mention that during his childhood, the Beta Israel weddings had only Ethiopian music. There was no Hebrew, and certainly no English, because the community had only recently left their communities in Ethiopia to settle in Israel. 2004 is the year he remembers a subtle introduction of Hebrew and English songs into wedding playlists, perhaps credited to the natural exposure to the different cultures present in Israel and the West, or possibly a quiet yearning to align and integrate into Israeli culture. I presume that multiple affects led to the effects of music played at the weddings of the community, and the result has mixed views. The younger generations know and more generally enjoy different music, while the elders often sit during the music that is not Ethiopian.

Sometime after two in the morning, the music faded away as the youngsters moved outside. I watched the bride and groom, soaking up the last few minutes of their special night, and witnessed a small kiss they shared. Although a fast peck, the kiss was something that would never have been seen among their parents, as it is taboo in the Ethiopian community to show physical affection in that manner in public. However, the kiss was done long after the elders left, a time where only the younger crowd was around, a crowd that has been more assimilated into Israeli culture. For that reason, it was not strange for their friends and cousins to see the kiss, but

it might be considered inappropriate if the elders saw²⁴. Over the years, more and more of the next generations of Beta Israel have begun to kiss in front of their parents at weddings. Most often it takes form on the forehead or the cheek, but it is also frequently seen on the lips. This usually occurs in less traditional and religious families, who are more eager to embrace change.

A taboo that has not seen a shift as the next generations spend more time in Israel is smoking cigarettes in front of the elders. Malka wanted to smoke a cigarette at the wedding, and I asked her what was stopping her. “We have to go outside and away from the elders. It is disrespectful to smoke in front of them.” Malka, who wears clothes that are considered taboo by the elders, says she has never once smoked in front of her parents. This is a strongly held view in the community, highlighting the need to respect and honor the elders, who view the action as uncouth.

Despite cigarettes being common among all ages in Israel, including in the Ethiopian community, I have yet to see elder women smoking cigarettes. Younger women, however, smoke frequently, whether it is normal cigarettes, cigarettes hand rolled with tobacco and papers, or electronic vapes. In public spheres, like on the streets and at parties and meetings, the next generations of the community smoke frequently. I have never been in a group without someone who has something to smoke. Despite its everyday and frequent use, all friends except one will not smoke in front of their parents or other elders.

A point of contention regarding weddings is the shift in acceptance regarding the taboos of marriage in the Beta Israel community. Strict cultural norms for decades have prohibited people of less than seven degrees of separation (generations) from getting married. This is of importance considering the size of the community is less than 200,000 in Israel, making many

²⁴ Note that at the ceremony of marriage under the Chuppah, when the ceremony concluded, the bride and groom did not kiss as is common in the United States, they hugged.

families distant relatives. This cultural norm has seen a massive shift over the years, as the Ethiopian community begins to marry under seven generations. The majority of the next generation says that up to five generations is enough, with one friend saying that the kes will now marry five generations and maybe four. It was expressed by everyone that three generations under is not allowed.

Many of my friends have ‘given up’ on marrying in the community, because every time they get a partner, their parents check right away with family members to ensure they are over seven generations. One friend only dates men outside of the community for this reason, saying she doesn't want her parents ‘in her business.’ A different friend does want to marry in the community, but says that seven generations is often too difficult, so she will settle with four or five. Another friend’s cousin married within four generations, and the grandma refused to go to the wedding. These actions explain why so many of the parents that I interacted with saw me as a possible partner for their children: there is no possibility that I am within the seven generations, and I am Jewish, which is often something the elders insist of their children’s partners.

The taboo has become in this way a murky and blurred boundary, often leading to fights within families because the elders want to preserve the tradition and the younger generations want to leave it. A friend of mine, who has a girlfriend of seven years, says his grandma did the research to find out the generations and confirmed that they were five generations, so they cannot marry. Nevertheless, his mom said it is okay, but only because the connection is from his dad’s side. He continues, saying, “Everyone is family in the community, what can you do? I don’t care and I will marry her.”

In this light, the taboo against marrying under seven generations is slowly but surely fading, representing a large shift in cultural norms that have existed for centuries. This could be

because of the adaptation of Israeli Western views on marriage, which prioritize individual choice and desires over the community and elders' opinions. It could be because it is harder to track familial lineage because of the migration to Israel and the distance between families around the country, which is different than the isolated villages of which they lived in Ethiopia. It could also be because of the desire for Ethiopians to marry within the community to preserve the culture and continue traditions in the way they are familiar.

Beta Israel weddings, despite the immense amount of ritual from Ethiopia present during this night, have become increasingly more Israeli and less traditional, explaining why the elders left so early. The Kes prayed in Hebrew and Ge'ez alike under the Chuppah, symbolizing the fusion of two cultures that is the Beta Israel. The ritual associated with Kaba, the money placed on the foreheads, and the hours of Ethiopian music at the beginning are the highlights of the Ethiopian culture that has remained over the decades of the community in Israel. These parts of the wedding give the elders a chance to enjoy and continue in the rituals that are prevalent among the habesha community. On the contrary, Israeli and English music made up most of the wedding, with Ed Sheeran playing as the bride walked down the aisle. Younger generations do not wear Ethiopian traditional clothing and many Ethiopian weddings do not have a kes officiate the wedding, although this wedding did. The cuisine and drink are completely Western. What does this mean? Traditions change because “it is the most powerful practical means of incorporation” into the dominant understandings of culture” (Williams 1977, 115). The Beta Israel community has been influenced by both civil and political society, which urge the assimilation of the community into the hegemonic norms and values of the Israeli state.

The Bar Mitzvah

The Bar and Bat Mitzvot are one of the most commonly known *rites of passage* in Judaism. At age twelve for girls and thirteen for boys, the young boy or girl has a ceremony to celebrate the crossing from childhood to adulthood, the day marking their entrance into adulthood according to Jewish Law. In contemporary society, there is less of an immediate shift after this ritual, as a person of such a young age has the responsibility to go to school and possibly have a manageable job on the side. Nonetheless, this rite of passage has been one of the defining factors of a person's Judaism for centuries; something that has been held onto even in the diaspora of the Jewish community at large. However, it was something that Beta Israel did not adhere to in Ethiopia because of the lack of communication with other Jews in the world. The move to Israel saw a rapid adherence to the ritual and is now practiced by the Beta Israel.

Rites of passage, coined by Anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep, are the transition from one category to another, occurring often through ritual or other visible movements and ceremonies that move one from a liminal position to a place of stability. "Van Gennep himself defined *rites de passage* as 'rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age' (Turner 1969, 94). It can be from one status to another, one place to another, or one time to another. Victor Turner explains, "The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a "state"), or from both" (Turner 1969, 94). The Bar Mitzvah fits directly into the category of "initiation rites", wherein many different cultures celebrate or honor the stage of puberty and moving into one's stage of adulthood²⁵.

²⁵ Although it is worthy to note that not all such initiation rites coincide with puberty.

Selam's cousin had a Bar Mitzvah, and she and her family insisted on my attendance, which I accepted happily. I went to one of her sister's homes who lives close to the venue, and we met her parents and some of the other sisters at the event. Along the same lines as the wedding, we walked into a venue, this time in Ramle, a city also on the outskirts of Tel Aviv. The elder women were again dressed in kemis, often white with Ethiopian patterns flattering the edges, and the majority of men in white button-downs or more casual shirts, with some wearing suits. The younger women wore an array of different colored dresses and skirts. A different friend told me that she has been to this venue many a time for different ceremonies and events, and that it is often booked by Ethiopian Jews, who make up a sizable percentage of the city's population.

At the door were envelopes to put in money as gifts. An older woman in kemis asked Tikva, one of Selam's sisters, to write the letter to put in the envelope, which Tikva did obediently. Afterwards, I asked her who she was. "I don't know her. She asked me to write in Hebrew because she doesn't know how." We walked down the stairs to the main room, and at the bottom of the stairs was Selam's dad. He stood there looking at us with a big smile. I asked him why he was standing there, confused as to why he was not sitting down like everyone else. He pointed to the big black box next to him. I realized that he had the honor and responsibility of guarding the Kupa at the Bar Mitzvah. Selam grabbed my hand and we continued on.

We reached a table where I recognized half of her sisters, the other half people I have never met. The table was a young crowd. I turned to Selam, asking her where her mom is. She pointed across the room, where her mom sat with other older women. I got up and went to hug her, as she laughed and hugged back. "I want to sit with you, mom!" "I am sitting with my friends, you sit over there with the kids." I told her to enjoy, and went back to my seat, surveying

the room. All elders sat together, and all of the next generations sat together, divided by both age and connection. Like the family of Selam, I was sure other tables gathered by family relations. This event was much smaller than the wedding, presenting itself as more family oriented and intimate. The friends of the Bar Mitzvah, though, I found later on the dance floor.

Everyone began to clap and face the back, and I realized the ritual had started. First, the boy's parents made an entrance, then the grandparents fell behind them, and finally, the young boy, in a grey suit and a white kippah, walked out to a popular Amharic song blasting from the speakers, with two *Breslov Hasidim*²⁶ on either side of him holding large shofars. Before this night, I had never heard the sound of a shofar being blown besides during the month of Elul, the last month of the Jewish calendar, in which the high holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur signal a new year and a new beginning.

My eyes widened as I witnessed something that I had never seen before: Hasidim blowing the shofar at the Bar Mitzvah of a black Jew. The elders clapped as the men came to a standstill. The music continued to play, and the Hasidim wrapped the ram's horn around their necks and began clapping and dancing to the music. The music came to a stop, and all was quiet, as the DJ congratulated the boy on this milestone in his life. The Hasidim put the tips of the shofars to their lips, and in sync, they blew. The sound of the shofar is loud, forceful; it is a horn, a siren, a call. The sound penetrated everyone and everything around it. The children watched them intently, and the adults took videos. The first blow was long, with consecutive ones following, one last long call, a call for a new beginning. The shofar marks a new time in the boy's life, moving from a liminal position back to a stable one, from a boy to a man. "The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has

²⁶ A sect of orthodox Judaism.

rights and obligations vis-a-vis others of a clearly defined and "structural" type; he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions" (Turner 1969, 95). Right as they stopped, the cheers filled the place of the shofar as people danced into the middle of the floor and circled the boy.

He first did Kiddush, praying over the wine as expected of him by Jewish ritual, considering his new status as a man. This more clearly solidifies his devotion to Hashem and his responsibilities as a Jewish man. He succeeded, leading to more cheers as he took a sip of the wine. The DJ then played Israeli music as everyone danced in the middle. An oversized, carnivalesque doll of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810), the founder of Breslov Hasidism in Eastern Europe, danced in the center.



Figure 6. The doll of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, in front of him one of the Breslov Chasidim. Photo taken by Kaela Goldstein.

After some time, the music switched from Israeli to Ethiopian, eskista coming naturally to the community with the rhythm. A circle was formed around the boy and his immediate family as they danced, shaking their shoulders from side to side. A woman put her hand on the boy's forehead, slapping a twenty-shekel bill which he took and handed to his mom. Following behind her were dozens of people doing the same, also putting money on the foreheads of his parents. After some time playing Ethiopian music, everyone returned to their seats for dinner.

The waiters came to our table and gave us the menu options: fish or berekas. At every table there were wine bottles and beers, and a few of the men had bottles of vodka next to them, which they had brought. Waiters came around shortly after and asked what we would like to eat. All food present, just like the wedding, were Israeli foods, with schnitzel and fish as the first course options. The absence of injera and other Ethiopian foods, and no Ethiopian liquor but rather American beer and wine, illustrates the assimilation into Israeli society.

An older woman who was a relative of the family pulled up a seat next to us and sat down. We all got our food and started eating, but she did not. "Why won't you eat?" People asked. She said that she will not eat until everyone else is finished. Such a level of respect was one I had not yet seen before but given that respect is one of the core pillars of the culture, it wasn't a shock that she said this. The table protested, saying she must eat, but she refused, and we carried on with the food and conversation.

Once again, the Hasidim quieted the room and began to blow the shofar. The boy stood at the front of the room, a cake lit with candles placed before him, decorated with the first letters of the Hebrew alphabet. He blew them out as the shofar continued to blast. Perhaps his birthday was recent, as the Bar Mitzvah is supposed to be in close proximity to the thirteenth birthday.

Some elders approached him and handed him gifts: two Jewish star necklaces and a watch. The gift of a Jewish star to wear around the neck once again illustrates a new beginning: one where, although he may have been a proud Jew before, the symbol around his neck gifted to him will remind him and others of his Judaism.

Everyone once again congregated on the dance floor, Ethiopian music resuming. I looked at the DJ booth, shocked at the length of time the Ethiopian music had played, and saw that the DJ was an older Ethiopian man. Family and friends continued to place money on the foreheads for some time, until the Israeli music started. Almost immediately, the floor emptied of the elders which were replaced by children who began to dance. Just as visible with the wedding, the change in music led to a quick change in atmosphere. This ceremony, though, was dominated by Ethiopian music, while the latter by Israeli music and Afrobeats.

In many families that I had come to know, many of the older siblings, whether born in Ethiopia or born during the first years after the Aliyot, did not have a Bar Mitzvah, but the younger ones did. A few factors explain this: economic struggles in the first years and the adaptation to Israeli Judaism took time to unfold in the community. The Bar Mitzvah integrated Beta Israel into mainstream society both religiously and socially, presenting a shift in internal and external views in the community. An example of this shift externally is the interaction between Breslov Hasidism, which quite a few Ethiopians have adopted, and the Breslov acceptance of Ethiopian Jews, which is exhibited by the two men coming to the Bar Mitzvah and performing in the ritual. One friend told me that the Bar/Bat Mitzvot in the community were adopted with joy because it is a religious ceremony celebrating Judaism, and the Beta Israel very strongly followed Jewish customs in Ethiopia and wanted to continue that with the new understanding of Judaism that they gained in Israel.

The Bar Mitzvah is an important milestone in Jewish life. I asked many interlocutors who did not have a Bar Mitzvah what it feels like for them. To my surprise, not one of them expressed a negative attitude. One friend explains: “It wasn't a serious thing. In America it is big and serious because you connect to your Judaism through it. Here we have Judaism all around us.” The correlation between the ages of siblings and the siblings that had Bar/Bat Mitzvot also corresponds to the lives of their friends. This friend noted that most of her friends did not have Bar/Bat Mitzvot either, possibly explaining another reason why it was less of a big deal: it is seen throughout the community. She also added that largely every school in Israel has a Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebration in school. A party is held for the age groups, and parents bring presents. They even take school trips and celebrate Shabbat together.

This ritual that I attended did not include the ceremony of reading from the Torah in synagogue, as a symbol of the transition from boyhood to adulthood. Despite this, I know that none of the interlocutors I interacted with know of an Ethiopian Jewish *woman* who has read from the Torah. As someone who grew up in the Conservative Movement in the United States, I read seven Aliyot from the Torah, leading the majority of my Bat Mitzvah service. This fact was met with shock by my Ethiopian friends, who had never heard of a woman reading from the Torah. All except one woman said they would never do it, as it is not something women should do. The former said: “I wish we could do that also. The Ethiopian community is so religious.”

Although this was my first time witnessing a Bar Mitzvah in the community, my religious friends explained that the things I witnessed were usual. More secular families, on the other hand, expressed to me that a lot of the Bar Mitzvot resemble regular birthday parties, with cake and dancing, and without religious symbols such as the Hasidim, the shofar, and Kiddush. Although there was a considerable amount of Israeli music engulfing the end of the party as the

elders left, unlike the wedding, most of the music was Ethiopian. This could be because of the specific family, because of the DJ they choose, because unlike the wedding, it is a smaller, more intimate event, or perhaps it is known that Beta Israel Mitzvot are usually majority Ethiopian music.

Callactivit

“This is not a piece of paper, but my arm extending across all the damn miles between us to hold you and hug you with all the strength, we have had to gain from the pain.” Pat Parker

There is a post on Instagram, a cartoon-like image of Ethiopian men and women alike, sitting around a table drinking buna, smiling at one another. The caption begins with: “Have you ever sat in an Ethiopian LGBTQ circle? For most of the community, the answer will be no. Whoever has, knows how great the experience is.”

A mere seven years ago, Callactivit came to be. 2017 was the year that Solomon Tekah, an Ethiopian Jewish Israeli, was killed by an Israeli police officer. The death led to an eruption of protests, and a calling of a few Ethiopian Jewish women to further the work they had started just a year before with the Ethiopian community in Israel. Callactivit is the first organization created by queer Ethiopian Jewish women in Israel, serving the black community through themes of sexuality and gender, race and racism, culture, and art. I was first introduced to the Callactivit initiative through an Israeli man protesting on the streets of Tel Aviv sometime in early June, who was wearing a shirt that read “LGBTQS against Pinkwashing” in English, Hebrew, and Arabic. I stopped him, immediately curious as to who this man was and where he came from. He told me he was at a protest, to which I naturally asked if there were any Ethiopians there. He replied no but said that there is radical leftist activism in the Ethiopian Jewish community. This then led us into a conversation about radical activism, being activism that does not find place in a hegemony dominated by anti-Arab and anti-Black rhetoric. He gave me the Instagram of this group, and I thanked him and continued on my way.

Some weeks later, one of the founders of the organization, Janet Belay, was at an Ethiopian club that I frequented with my friends. A good friend of mine tapped me, pointing and saying, “That woman is amazing. She runs a queer Beta Israel organization.” I said, “Is it Callactivit?” “Yes, how did you know! Let me introduce you.” We walked up and did introductions, where I told her how I was planning on going to the poetry night taking place at the center the next evening. She gave me her phone number, inviting me openly and kindly.

The next evening, I took a bus to Florentine, a part of Tel Aviv known to some as artsy, hip, and funk, while to others a place where many refugees live, largely Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Sudanese. Street art, posters, and stickers covered every wall and bench in sight. I found it fitting that the location of this place was somewhere right between the two: a mix of black skin, struggle, art, and resilience.

I walked down a dark alley, hearing faint, heartfelt laughs, knowing I was almost there. As I turned a corner, I saw a white building with white walls, paint chipping at corners and wires lining the perimeter of the ceiling. I found six Ethiopians sitting around a table, the smell of cigarettes wafting in the air. Janet saw me and introduced me to everyone, explaining that they are waiting for a few more people before starting the poetry night. I sat with this group outside, and met two men from the community, one queer and one not. I wondered curiously why a straight man was with a bunch of queer people and came to realize that this program is created and directed by queer Beta Israel, but there are many straight-identifying people that come because of the beauty of the space. It is a space of art, open-mindedness, and culture, and provides the ability to build and create freely and without restraints or judgements, possibly pushing and overturning boundaries that could not be done elsewhere.

Later on, we walked upstairs into something like an apartment that had been changed into a community space: artwork lining the walls, rugs, couches and chairs, snacks and drinks. A kitchen sat in the back. At the ‘stage’ was a large speaker attached to a microphone, a podium holding it up, yearning to be used. A bookcase sat quietly behind it, a jebena on the top, symbolizing the importance of habesha culture.



Figure 7. The “stage” at Callactivit. Photo taken by Kaela Goldstein.

Belay led the program with another woman, as they took turns reading from a book by Pat Parker that has been translated into Hebrew. She explained the importance of Parker, an

African American poet, a black lesbian activist and feminist, who was an activist in California during the latter half of the 1900s. I wondered why they were focusing the evening around an African American woman, from a place on the other side of the world. Why not focus on someone from their own community? I realized that if Janet was the first openly queer poet in the Beta Israel community, then there is no history of such a phenomenon. This led Callactivit, and much of black culture in Israel, to find inspiration and connection through movements and individuals in the West, particularly the United States.

The two chose a few poems from the book to read, the poems they chose being of significance both to them and the audience. One of the poems is titled *My Lover is a Woman*, which spoke about the comfort and safety of a queer relationship, a space to escape from the negative commentary of the family. It goes on to address the space as a place far from the racism and the disdain her family feels towards white people. Janet read with passion:

“then—I never think of the little boy
 who spat & called me nigger
 never think of the policemen
 who kicked my body & said crawl
 never think of Black bodies
 hanging in trees or filled
 with bullet holes
 never hear my sisters say
 white folks hair stinks
 don’t trust any of them

never feel my father
 turn in his grave
 never hear my mother talk
 of her backache after scrubbing floors
 never hear her cry
 Lord, what kind of child is this?"

Another poem chosen out of the many in the Pat Parker book is called *For the white person who wants to know how to be my friend*, telling of the complexities that accompany interracial friendships. It is a poem guided by the values of respect, acknowledgment, and understanding. Parker explained through poetry the feelings that many black individuals feel: we want to be treated as human beings; it is important to see our color, but that is not the entirety of the friendship. These poems provided a chance to acknowledge the intersections of race, sexuality, and identity more generally to queer black people in Israel.

Callactivit, as explained by Janet herself, serves generally as a "black space to think, be critical, and feel safe. They don't have this in other places," she said. The NGO is one of a kind, serving the next generations of Ethiopians in Israel that question hard topics in both the Israeli community and the Ethiopian community, fostering collective growth in both spheres. Many different programs have and continue to be hosted in the organization, from podcasts and communal events with artists, magazines and other literary works by members of the community, and seminars.

The magazines were a project done a few years ago and have since halted, but nonetheless remain important to note. Raymond Williams emphasized that, "It (hegemony) has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted,

limited, altered, and challenged by pressures not at all its own” (Williams 1977, 112). Williams called for a *need* to explore such alternative structures because of their effects and affects that influence the hegemony to which they are shifting. Perhaps they are not shifting in systematic ways, but surely they are creating affective responses in the population that lead to a deeper understanding of the beauty of the community at hand. Janet gave me a few magazines to look over, with many of the poets and artists featured in the magazine being friends of mine. One magazine, titled *Soul* provides a “platform to the voices and experiences related to the soul of Ethiopian women in Israel... The topics in the magazine are many and varied and bear witness to the shared traumatic experiences such as racism, discrimination, identity crisis, violence in all its forms. All of these experiences bind our souls together and allow us to understand each other” (Callactivit 2020).

A reasonable portion of this magazine is filled with the words of Leah Hilo, one of the co-founders of the organization along with Janet. Leah spoke of her own personal account of life in Israel, and how her Israeli and Ethiopian identities shaped her self-perception and understanding of the world. I chose to share some of her words, because the *exact* words she said have been told to me by others in the community a few *dozen* times. This is not to say that everyone in the community feels this way, for I cannot get too close to the dangers of generalization. I also know from many other accounts that what I will share is not the experience of everyone. Despite this fact, over half of the people I interacted with on an intimate level have indeed shared similar if not the exact same sentiments.

During her childhood, Leah explained that she did not see nor understand the immigration of her parents and the reaction from Israeli society in everyday life, which was often accompanied with microaggressions and overt racism, something that children often miss. “As a

child I saw how people looked at them with condescending expressions and there were stages when I myself believed it and thought they were worthless, that they had nothing to teach me” (Hilo 2020). Such a statement is powerful, speaking of parents that have nurtured and cared for their child in such a manner seems unsensible. “Today it hurts me that I believed the white gaze on them” (Hilo 2020). This is the fundamental nature of reality in culture: stereotypes are believed to be facts and have affects; they then become ontological truths that must be learned. Leah and many others are doing the work associated with that very unlearning. Leah’s statement in this magazine is vital to acknowledge in order to understand the experiences of many of the next generation of the Beta Israel. The following are excerpts of Leah’s statement from the *Soul* magazine, published by Callactivit.

“Despite this, I never heard complaints from my parents about racism. Only now that I have grown up, my mother allows herself to share with me from time to time some racist experiences of one kind or another. One can only imagine how the humiliation in front of their children affected their psyche or their sense of value and self-respect. Difficulties were piled on them; they tried to change them, to Judaize them and ‘civilize’ them. To force our parents to leave their past and experience behind and rush into the 21st century. From the beautiful open landscapes that were their home, they moved to concrete blocks. Everything they knew was no longer relevant, or rather they were made to feel that way. Maybe that's why they rarely talk about the life they had in Ethiopia. From the moment they arrived, they had to survive. To work any job they were offered just to put bread on the table. Jobs that kept them and us in a pinch, jobs that the State thought they were suitable for. The State paved our parents for a life of poverty. Having no tools to deal with the new country they arrived in, they were housed in the periphery where there are no employment opportunities and were expected to immediately fit into the stigmas they were seen as. This survival mode has a mental price that we all pay. They never talked about it because they wanted to be strong for us, but also because Ethiopians are not used to talking about feelings. My personal experience can testify to this, and I also recently heard a saying in Amharic that supports this, translating to ‘what you can't keep in your stomach, don't tell anyone’. I thought about it a lot, but I wasn't surprised because the values of societies dominated by men are the same all over the world. Those who break the silence bear the consequences. Especially if they are women.”

Such sentiments underscore the importance of the work at Kfar Beta Israel, which strives to reinstall value into the elders and connect them to the life they once had. What also becomes

visible through this statement, though, is the impact of the elders' experiences on the next generations in Israel, highlighting negative self and communal perceptions.

“Acknowledging that the State is backing this violence against you crushes your sense of self-worth. Police violence along with other forms of oppression: education, welfare, discrimination in employment, causes a deep feeling of alienation and lack of belonging. All of these play a central role in the identity crisis that many of us experience.”

Although not mentioned in depth, I often come back to the concept of hegemony and the effects dominant hegemony has on marginalized communities in the society at hand. Much work has to be done, but there are many organizations currently working to uplift and provide resources for Ethiopian Jewish students in Israel to go to university and get good job opportunities.

“Racism is a trauma for all intents and purposes. A trauma that we experience and experience again and again. This trauma is present at every stage of our lives. Several times in my life I didn't go to a job interview I wanted because I was afraid they wouldn't accept an Ethiopian. Countless times I felt the anxiety level in my body rise because someone said something racist. This is no small thing; we carry the thought that at any moment we may be the target of ridicule, condescension, or hatred just because of the color of our skin. Every such experience triggers the trauma and turns the guts, because they deprive us of our freedom to exist in the world and make it difficult to love ourselves. All of this causes so much anger and pain to build up within us. Too many times I have felt my mental health undermined by this. What intensifies these feelings is the fact that Israeli society does not recognize all of these experiences. Israeli society does not recognize the legitimacy of our anger. We must not be angry.”

To be aware of one's feelings and the power of hegemonic norms is something that can be seen in Leah's eloquent words of vulnerability. All of these feelings are in relation to Israeli society, yet it is very easy to make similarities to black struggles in the U.S. and elsewhere, with themes of alienation through systematic racism and trauma showing up in largely every country in some shape or form. What does this mean for the position of Ethiopian Jewry in Israel? That

despite large numbers of the next generations in Israel connecting to such sentiments as expressed above, they are both Ethiopian and Israeli, holding a liminal position in society. They do not neatly fit into Ethiopian culture because of their Jew and Israeli identities nor Israeli culture because of their black and Ethiopian identities, proving a socially and structurally ambiguous position.

Anthropologist Victor Turner coined the term of liminality, expressing entities that are “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner 1969, 95). This term can be applied to communities undergoing migration, existing between multiple cultures. Turner explains liminality as, “likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon” (Turner 1969, 95). Liminality can be used to describe the feelings Hilo speaks of: feeling invisible, not good enough in Israeli society, and not being understood or accepted for who she is. Liminality in the way she experiences it is much different from that of her parents, as she grew up speaking Hebrew from a young age and going to school with Israelis. Nonetheless, both generational trauma and her own personal experiences shed light on the complex position individuals in the Beta Israel community hold.

Liminality, however, is a transitional phase between two states of stability. The case of the Beta Israel is that in Ethiopia, they were not fully accepted as Ethiopians, viewed as outsiders by the State. Despite outside influence, they had stable communities and identities. In Israel, their black skin and different culture sets them apart from that of the majority. In this way, the question of whether or not they will exit this liminal phase of being neither here nor there and fully integrate into Israeli society is at the forefront of this ethnography.

At the end of the magazine is a list of Ethiopian mental health specialists, highlighting the work Callactivit does. So many Ethiopian Jews have explained that they cannot talk to a therapist who cannot understand them. This page, providing numbers and locations of Ethiopian therapists, serves as a tool to uplift the community, offering a space to heal. “It’s for us by us,” Janet said, echoing the sentiments of black leaders and movements that take control of their lives, because if not them, who will?

This page was especially important because of the skewed view of therapy in the community. Many of my friends, who were born in Israel, have never been to therapy, and many express that they do not want to go. “I can take care of myself and my feelings,” Malka told me. The taboo around mental health in the community becomes visible in such a statement. Jacob told us the same evening that he had to go to therapy because of the requirement of the degree he pursued, and that the man was white and did not understand him. Jacob explained that he told the therapist that a cop stopped him on the way home from a library as a kid, questioning him, to which the therapist responded that he was paranoid. “He will never know what it’s like to hear police sirens and look over your shoulder.” He reflects on this experience, highlighting the need for more black therapists that can understand both their culture and their struggle as black individuals.

A second magazine, titled *Neighborhood* was created to acknowledge the complexity of growing up in Israel for Ethiopian Jews. A deep dive into the neighborhoods might seem at first irrelevant, insignificant. Yet as some in the community grew up, “the ‘neighborhoods’ met the outside world, and this encounter quickly taught us that our neighborhood is a source of shame and not pride” (Callactivit 2019). Written by the community itself, the magazine uses the words of these very neighborhoods to emphasize the complexity of the lives of the community, both the

good and the bad. “The community, the smells, the sounds, the slang, the sights, the unrequited loves, the childhood games, the nosy neighbors and the nice ones who will always be by your side mainly in joy and sadness - all of this is culture” (Callactivit 2019). Both this magazine and this space serve as an entity to look reality in the face. A place to access the truth even when it is uncomfortable.

Callactivit talks about things that are taboo to speak about in the community. It is an organization founded by women, which in itself is a radical act. The discomfort that may occur from participating in events, involving the opening of wounds so unconsciously kept tucked away, is something that very few people in the *world* have the ability to do. For this reason, the group does not have large turnouts at events, and there are about forty members that are consistent. People that I say with admiration are *special*; people that want to unlearn the things that hold both them and their communities from something greater. Despite such few people, Callactivit is a group that I heard often come up in conversation. With over 5,000 followers on Instagram and Facebook, both public accounts, they are not going unnoticed in the Beta Israel community. Many of the young adults in the community watch from afar the work taking place there, perhaps debating if they should join as well.

As a place of creativity, Callactivit is in contact with quite a few black artists, ranging from the classic painter to singers and musicians. Somewhere in the middle is Rina Ingidou, a digital artist who has partnered many a time with Callactivit to showcase her work and connect with others. Her artwork illustrates both the beauty and pain experienced by members of the Beta Israel community. Rina uses digital technology to paint a contemporary picture of the next generations of Ethiopian Jews in Israel, bridging topics such as Afro-futurism, gender, race, and religion.

Rina was first inspired by the 2015 protests that followed the filmed assault of an Ethiopian Israeli soldier, Damas Pakada, by Israeli police while coming home from his army base. Ethiopian Jews took to the streets in large numbers, this being a protest not only for Pakada, but that emphasized the ongoing discrimination and systematic racism the community faced at large. Rina was twenty-four at the time of the protests, learning graphic design at a school in Jerusalem. She felt the need to do something but wasn't sure what.

At her university, she was often approached by students and faculty alike, all questioning why she only drew black bodies. She explained to them that it wasn't an act of protest, but that she drew the people that were similar to her. It was an unconscious action, being attracted to the things that most resemble our own lives and understandings of the world. She saw beauty in black skin. Growing up, however, she, "wanted to be Israeli like everyone else." This is a narrative that is all too common among the next generations who grow up in Israel: the shame and embarrassment that followed them because of how they were perceived by others. This affect was one that Rina overcame through her art.

The protests of 2015 were, as Rina saw it, largely led and executed by women. She gives credit to Pnina Tamano-Shata, the first Ethiopian woman to serve in the Israeli Knesset (Parliament), for being a leading figure in these protests. She saw that the protests were led by women, women exhibiting strength and courage in the face of adversity. For Rina, seeing strong black women from her community taking action and leading large masses of people inspired her to create compositions that illustrate such power. Shortly after, she published a few of her works, all of Ethiopian women, which were met with many positive responses from the community.

The responses, coming from Ethiopian Jews and other Ethiopians in Ethiopia and the United States, encouraged her to continue. "Someone needs this in the end," she told me,

thinking back to the reason she started making art for the community. “If one Ethiopian person sees it, maybe it will do them good.” Rina often utilizes traditional Ethiopian patterns visible on Ethiopian clothing, the *mosev* and the dishes associated with the buna ritual as backdrops of her creations. She is also influenced by the art of the African diaspora more generally, highlighting the influence of African American art in her creations. The concept of afro-futurism is integrated in much of her work, presenting phenomenon from both the communities past, present, and future; “The traditional culture, how we look today, and how we could look in the future.” Rina added with certainty that, “We don't need to abandon our tradition to survive in the future.”

Despite being an introvert, she shared, and continues to share, a vulnerable part of herself with the world. Tackling taboos in the Beta Israel community while also embracing the community amid discrimination is a difficult task. “It comes from a deep place within me,” she expressed, her voice carrying with it emotions unspoken. Rina overcame both internal and external struggles, and the reward was a deeper connection to both herself and to others, one of the most beautiful aspects of being human.



Figure 8. Queen Judith Artwork by Rina Ingidou.

One of the artworks done by Rina is Queen Judith, a queen in Ethiopia from the 10th century. The queen's association with the Beta Israel is still controversial, but she is often credited with the revolt against the Axumite kingdom, which was largely dominated by Christianity, and is coined by some as the "Queen of Beta Israel". Visible in this photo is the *Star of David*, a staple of Judaism, present on the Kaba, which was mentioned in the wedding chapter. The bright golds on the crown and the Kaba, embroidered with fire, underscore the strength of the flame within the Beta Israel community; a flame that was ignited by the strength and perseverance of Ethiopian Jewish women.



Figure 9. Gender Role artwork by Rina Ingidou.

This illustration that is figure nine breaks the gender taboos by the switching of entities traditionally assigned to one sex on the opposite. The man is seen wearing a *kemis*, while the woman wears the *netella*, which is the traditional clothing of the men; tattoos associated with women are visible on the man, and the woman has short hair and a piece of twig in her mouth, which is associated with men. Such actions encourage a thought process that challenges gender roles in society. Many other illustrations done by Rina similarly bring to light the many rituals traditionally done by women that men could partake in as well, such as the buna ritual. Rina published this craftwork on social media with a quote by Janelle Monae: “Even if it makes others uncomfortable, I will love who I am.”

I end this chapter making the claim that Callactivit is an alternative hegemony. It is a group of individuals from a marginalized community in Israel that work “to define for ourselves what our culture is. Which has always existed but was and still is ignored by Israeli culture” (Callactivit 2019). With cultural freedom and appreciation on the forefront, the radical and open-minded founders of this movement created a place to listen, connect, and validate the experiences of the next generations of black bodies in Israel. “Alternative political and cultural emphases, and the many forms of opposition and struggle, are important not only in themselves but as indicative features of what the hegemonic process has in practice had to work to control” (Williams 1977, 113). The hegemony placed on Ethiopian Jews is undoubtedly Israeli society, but also Ethiopian society and the taboos and biases that are in place within their own context. It is the goal of this organization to embrace the beauty and tackle the injustice, at once both shedding generations of silence and sparking a step towards healing and empowerment.

Clubbing for Culture

The music and social events of the next generations of Ethiopian Jews in Israel showed me the most about the shift that is taking place between the elders and their children. Interactions between different sexes, clothing styles, music choices, and upcoming artists themselves all contribute to the change in dynamics and hegemonic understandings, which evidently saw a large shift from the kfars in Ethiopia to the bustling nightlife of Israel. This chapter will present my lived experiences in the club scene along with the experiences told to me by interlocutors this summer, and what that means for the next generations of Beta Israel.

DJ I-Tek is a well-known DJ in clubs around Israel. He is the official DJ for many famous artists, including Abraham Ayellow, and is the DJ for many of the main clubs that Ethiopian Jews attend, largely in Tel Aviv. Although I had interacted with him in previous years, it was not until this summer that we became friends. He invited me to his parties, introduced me to his friends, and eventually I ended up having my birthday party at his house. His knowledge of Caribbean music and Ethiopian artists is extensive, and we often had long talks about both music and Ethiopian Jews of the next generations.

I-Tek is a Yemenite Jew, and from this perspective credits the racism in Israel to ignorance, explaining that the people who do not personally know black people think badly about them, but once they interact things change. He believes that racism in Israel will cease to exist in the next decade, because there will be so many intermarriages between different Jews; there will be so much mixing between cultures that people will no longer know their family history, and everyone will consider themselves Israeli Jews, one and the same. He credits this mixing to the end of racism, but also to the relationships that evolve from being in the military

and schools together, as well as the prominence that Ethiopian Israeli artists are gaining in Israeli society more generally. He DJs for many artists that travel around Israel, performing for children and adults. He explains that he traveled to northern Israel with Ethiopian singer Ofek Adanek, and “It was 100% white kids, all screaming his songs. One of their cultural heroes is a young habesha. It’s amazing.”

Abraham Ayellow is one of the most famous Ethiopian Jewish singers of the next generation in Israel, alongside Ofek Adanek, Bazzi B, Cafe Shachor Hazak, and KGC. Aside from Bazzi B, who makes reggae music in Hebrew, the artists mentioned all fall under the genre of music called ‘botz’ which translates to mud in English. The genre is often a mix between Hebrew and dancehall music, appearing around the year 2000. Malka describes her perception of botz: “for me it’s like dancehall. It’s more about the rhythm and less about the words.” Jacob describes botz as culture. He explained to me the following: “When we used to go to the first Ethiopian Jewish clubs, which my generation created, the facilities were bad. The toilet would always break, and there would be mud on the floor. So, this is botz, but in a good way. We didn’t want the fancy parties. We had no resources and bad alcohol, but we made fun out of it. We made culture.” As Jacob is thirty-four, his perspective is one that begins at the birth of the botz genre and Ethiopian Jewish clubs in Israel. Jacob himself was part of the group that began to create parties for the Beta Israel in the early 2000s. He explained to me that it was necessary because they were not welcome in the Israeli clubs.

Jacob told me of a time when his Ashkenazi friend from the military wanted him to come to his birthday party at a club, to which Jacob told him he would not be let in. He nevertheless tried, and to his dismay, he did not succeed because he was black. “The only places we had were what we made for ourselves. They didn’t let us into the other clubs back in the day, regular

Ethiopian Jews.” He began to see a shift in the early 2000s, when Ethiopian Jews began to open clubs for the younger generation in Tel Aviv and Rishon LeZion. As the large Aliyot to Israel were fairly recent, they started from nothing and worked to preserve their culture and make spaces where they can embrace the culture. Jacob explained, “I appreciate that we are here, but I don’t forget what it took for us to get here. The next generations don’t have to have a fear of not getting into a club. We worked hard so they can get this privilege.” Jacob was a pioneer in creating safe and welcoming spaces for the generations to come, and with admiration, I can say he did an amazing job.

My experience in Israel was the struggle to pick between which Ethiopian club to go to. Parties and bars run by the community now permeate Tel Aviv and its outskirts. Jacob unpacked the shift from the beginning, saying, “I am satisfied that we are welcome to clubs now, and at the same time, I don’t like to see (non-black) people who don’t listen to the music come to the places because they know they are fun. They don’t have respect for the music.” Music is deeply ingrained in culture, and after working so hard to create spaces for the community who were not welcome elsewhere, he is met with frustration when such people frequent the spaces. “Before, we were the only clubs who made black music. They used to make fun of us. It was a punchline in every time and place. Even comedians made fun of us. It’s hypocritical that they come now to enjoy themselves.” Not only did he have to grow up and create spaces where he was welcomed, at the same time, the Israel population was also not exposed to black people in media and music. “For Ethiopian Jews in Israel, watching MTV and VH1 were the only channels where we saw black people.” This sentiment underscores the lack of representation both as black people and Ethiopian people in Israel in earlier years. “We saw these black artists and we saw ourselves. This is why we got obsessed with American music. It was black people. Everything is globalized

now so it's easier, but twenty years ago, it was different.” Such a standpoint is largely agreed upon in the community and explains the popularity of music from the Caribbean and African Americans among the community.

Caribbean music has made its way to Israel with dancehall being one of the most popular genres. It makes sense, then, that botz, which mirrors dancehall, is frequently produced by Ethiopian Jewish artists. Ayellow, coming from a religious city in Israel, holds some of the most popular records in the genre. He has made numerous albums that revolve around women and money. Recently, Ayellow has undergone a personal shift, back to practicing Judaism and being more modest. He now always covers his head with either a kippah or a baseball cap, and he deleted all the songs with explicit content. A year ago, he returned them to platforms because he knows people enjoy them. When he performs these songs in concerts, he changes the more explicit words to different words, and often lets the crowd sing some of the more inappropriate phrases. He explains that the fact that he is religious does not mean he has to deny his past or take away music that others enjoy. He recently created a new album, called *Starting Over*, which includes songs of strength and perseverance. All new songs are about positive things, with no dirty language or cursing.

Taguy boy is another singer in the community who makes music in the botz genre. One song in particular, which is well known in the community, is important to mention. The song, titled “On This Day,” blends the Israeli and Ethiopian cultures through the perspective of a wedding, with botz as the mode of song. It begins with a beat popular in Ethiopian music, often accompanied by eskista, and then switches to a botz beat and rhythm. The visuals accompanying it on Spotify include a woman in kemis dancing eskista. The chorus speaks of the beauty of

marriage, of being together and celebrating. He mentions the joy of being with cousins, highlighting one of the most exciting parts of the wedding for many in the community.

Towards the end of the song, Tazguy boy says, “Let’s be happy like we know how.” The music changes from the dancehall beat of botz back to an Ethiopian beat. He stops singing, as the music encourages eskista through the body. There is no need for words during this part of the song, as the change in beat to habesha-styled rhythms explains what he meant by the previous line. At a Beta Israel wedding, Ethiopian music is a part of the culture that has survived, whether it is played a lot or a little. It is the staple of Ethiopian Israeli weddings, and something that has continued to be preserved. He ends the song by switching back to botz and continuing the image of the wedding he started. He wishes the couple happiness in being together, with children that only feel happiness. He ends the song saying, “Mazel Tov”. Such a phrase is a staple of Jewish celebration, and directly connects both his Ethiopian and Jewish identities to the song, illustrating a powerful merge and pride within the liminal position he holds in Israel.

There are clubs earmarked to the Ethiopian Jewish community that I frequented, teaching me a lot about the culture. The music ranges from hip hop to reggae, amapiano and drill, but is often mainly dancehall and afrobeats. Itzko is one of the clubs I most frequented, as many of my friends went to this club, and it was one of the clubs I enjoyed the most because of the people, the music, and the atmosphere. It is one of the most popular Ethiopian Jewish parties among young adults, taking place every Saturday evening.

The club, unlike most other Ethiopian clubs, does not allow individuals under a certain age to enter, ranging from twenty-four for women and twenty-five for men. The age range in general is often up to forty-five years of age, and because of the size of the community, it is not uncommon to see cousins at this club and others. Many members of the community go to Itzko

with siblings and cousins because they are also good friends. In this light, clubbing for the community becomes a family outing. Jacob told me, “I used to go with all of my cousins from all over the country. It was a cousin gathering.” It becomes not just a party to drink and dance, but a social event that connects family, often taking form as a time to catch up. I frequented the club with many of Selam’s siblings and cousins where we would often run into more family members.

Amit, one of my friends who I met at Itzko and who continues to work there, talked to me about the history of the club. He explained that it all started at a small venue outside of Tel Aviv in 2022 and was made by Ethiopians for Ethiopians. It used to open Saturday afternoon and was considered a day party, which limited the attendance because a good amount of the community keeps Shabbat. A lot of the next generation that are religious wanted kosher food and a place to go, and for that reason, the club now opens after Shabbat ends.

Jacob also works at this club and told me that the music is divided into three parts: RNB old-school, hip-hop/dancehall, and more recently afrobeats/amapiano (West and South African music). This illustrates music from across Africa, the Caribbean, and the U.S. that has become the heart of Ethiopian clubs in Israel. When I asked Jacob and Amit whether Itzko is a Beta Israel club, they both hesitated. I began to explain why I believed it was: the large majority of attendants are of the community, and the club does special events for Jewish holidays. When I was there during Hanukkah, there were sufganiyot ²⁷ and Hanukkah decorations.

There is also a celebration at Itzko for Sigd. Sigd is a holiday specific to the Beta Israel community, celebrated in Ethiopia for centuries for the hopes of returning to Jerusalem. Now that the community's dreams have been fulfilled, it is a celebration of the community and the fulfillment of such dreams. During the season of Sigd at Itzko last year, there were Ethiopian

²⁷ Jelly donuts eaten on Hanukkah; they are fried, and for that reason symbolize the oil that lasted eight days.

symbols scattered throughout the venue, ranging from buna, to the mosev, to Ethiopian music. After explaining such staples of the culture, they both agreed that Itzko is directed specifically to the Beta Israel community. Amit told me, “Every holiday we do a festival so people can celebrate.”

The attire at Ethiopian clubs is a range for women, from covered completely to sleeveless dresses and tops, skirts and pants. This is a large shift from Ethiopia, where it was taboo to dress immodestly in the community. It was uniform; women wore kemis and men netella. One of my friends came to my apartment before we went to a club, and she changed clothes at my house, explaining that her parents cannot see her in a dress above her knees. Most of the Beta Israel women at clubs wear jeans and pants, which is also taboo, but accepted in society more generally, as their legs are covered. A different friend explained the shift through her own experience: “In Ethiopia, we had certain norms because of the society and the elders, but the environment in Israel is different. We can see people our age that dress differently, and it's not something unusual.” She credits the change of clothing to the exposure into Israeli society. “It's more available to buy western clothes than traditional and modest clothing, but the one thing that will never change is the respect for our parents. And the clothes are one of them.” Her sentiments can be seen in the actions of my friend who changed at my house. It is considered disrespectful to wear immodest clothes in front of her parents, so she changes elsewhere.

The dance, despite the lively rhythms that accompany Caribbean and African music, is often more conservative. In Caribbean culture it is common to see intimate dancing between people of the opposite sexes, which is something I have never witnessed at these clubs. Men and women, for the most part, dance without touching, and the majority of women do not dance provocatively. Jacob credits this to the fact that cousins often attend the same parties as them,

and it would be inappropriate with them watching. It very much depends on each individual, as some women dance however they want to, and some dance more modestly and enjoy doing so. The women I know that dance in a more provocative manner are all over the age of thirty, meaning that it is perhaps their older age that accompanies more freedom and less worries about how others will perceive them.

Many of the clubs I went to that summer had concerts by Ethiopian artists. Bazzi B and Ofek Adanek made appearances at some of the clubs I went to. This underscores the popularity they hold in society, a society that was created with very few Ethiopian Jews and no singers from the community. In just four decades, the community has created a genre of music and gained popularity in society more generally, as notable by I-Tek's statement about Ofek Adanek's concert.

A friend age thirty told me that they used to play Ethiopian music in Amharic at the end of the clubs but that has changed, saying, "the younger kids ruined the culture. The youth are in charge of the clubs, the next generations, and they came with new music and left the old. They do not know what culture means for us." Some famous Caribbean and black artists, including Shenseea, Sean Paul, Chris Brown, Rihanna, Black Eyed Peas, 50 Cent, Tyga, and NLE Choppa have performed in Israel. They come because of the demand from the Ethiopian Jewish community, but also the larger black community in Israel, with many African refugees and Caribbeans living and growing up in the region.

I went to a concert of Vanessa Bling that summer, who is Jamaican, and the venue was at full capacity. The audience was majority Ethiopian Jews, with about twenty percent of the people of other Israeli and African descents. The dancehall beats are easy to catch onto, but the words, in Jamaican Patois, are unfamiliar to most of the concertgoers. This led to many people there and

many at clubs more generally to make up sounds similar to the words they hear, but they do not know the actual words.

Dancehall music is often filled with sexually explicit language, but because many of the people cannot understand how graphic some of the phrases are, they listen to the music regularly. I saw my friends very often saying the wrong words, which would lead me to translate the lyrics to them. They always looked back in shock, almost a face of horror, at the words they heard. Many friends told me I ‘ruined’ their favorite songs. This sentiment was especially visible among my religious friends, who would not listen to this music if they knew the words. This explains why Rivka no longer listens to this music.

One song by Vanessa Bling, “One Man”, played at every club that I went to, and is one of her most famous songs globally. One stanza of the song goes as follows:

“One man mi seh
 With a big "long john" mi seh
 Every day, every night
 Mi do it good, mi do it right (Awoh!)
 Mi protect my man, and protect myself
 No boy can laugh after my boyfriend
 Them think seh mi gi' weh di pussy easy
 Mi laugh afta dem”

The chorus goes “One man, to mi pum pum, yeah.”

The lyrics are sexually charged, referring to her performance during sexual intercourse as told by her boyfriend. It then goes on to say, only one man can have my ‘pum pum’. The venue of the concert I attended was filled with people of all religious sects, dozens of black and white men alike, wearing kippahs and tzitzit. When this song played, largely everyone’s cell phone was out, recording and singing along in some shape or form. I was able to view the concert at one point from the side of the stage, and I looked around in amazement: the impact of the small island of Jamaica had reached the land of Israel. I was also amazed because as these lyrics ring from her microphone, everyone sings along joyously, an ignorant bliss of not knowing the words visible in this moment.

DJ I-Tek knew about the fieldwork I was doing and invited me to sit in on one of the rehearsals for a large concert that would take place on my birthday, featuring some of the biggest Beta Israel artists. I gratefully accepted the offer, and one afternoon, I went to a small music studio in Tel Aviv to find Ayellow, his band, and I-Tek working on some of the numbers. I sat quietly in the corner, listening in awe to songs that I had listened to for years in person. The energy in the room was electric: the group was in sync, with laughter and culture filling the air.

On my birthday, towards the end of my fieldwork that summer, was the concert of Abraham Ayellow, Ofek Adanek, Hanni, and a few others. I went to Selam’s house, where I was greeted with a white crown of flowers, similar to the one I had given to Rivka a month before. This was my first flower crown, and after seeing its beauty and significance among my friends in Israel, I felt honored to be able to experience wearing it. Tikva, her friend, Selam and I went to the concert in a large arena next to the Tel Aviv port, where I found Jacob outside. I walked inside the venue with my friends and my crown, about to see some of the largest Ethiopian Jewish artists in existence embrace their culture through music. I saw many friends and cousins

of friends scattered throughout, who all wished me a happy birthday, as my flower crown made it quite obvious.

Ayellow reached the stage with his baseball cap after some time to many cheers, and just as at Caribbean concerts, people threw their hands in the air, making pretend shots in the air. The crowd was a mix of colors, with the majority being Ethiopian Jews, but many others were in attendance. Everyone knew the lyrics. I began to sing the words word for word, with my friends cheering me on, in shock that I knew them so well. At one point, he told the crowd to respond, saying “BOMBO” to a loud and enthusiastic response: “CLAT”. People began flicking lighters in the air, mirroring Caribbean culture, as Ayellow’s voice singing botz roared from the speakers.

Many other singers in the community, including Ofek Adanek and Hanni Mendeke, came on with features. The night was electric: culture and community filled the venue more than the people themselves. This was hands down one of the best nights of the summer: to be with friends who had become family on my birthday, listening to some of the biggest artists of the next generation. In each song was perseverance, resilience, and adaptation. The fact that every Ethiopian Jew in the crowd had undergone some form of racism became a nonexistent entity as the beauty of Caribbean, Ethiopian, and Israeli cultures overtook oppressive forces. Despite it all, the next generations of Beta Israel are making history.

Memory, Modernity, and Meanings

“I love this land deeply. What is important is that it is mine, and I am a part of what happens here.” Avraham Shmuel

Although comparatively small, the Ethiopian Jewish community is full of complexity and diversity. These attributes are visible in many different forms: in religion and race, in food and spirituality, and in knowledge and education in the general culture, to name a few examples. The honor and privilege of my experience within the Beta Israel community led to a drastic change in the way I see the world and the human condition. Each culture has its own norms, taboos, and biases, but to be engulfed in a culture that is not one's own has a profound impact on the mind. This occurs when one is open to learning and embracing difference. It is my greatest hope that the light of this community becomes visible through the ethnography I have written. I give credit to the best friends I made this summer, who have become family. The things I have learned only occurred because of the open hearts and minds of the individuals I met in the community.

Walking into this summer I expected a certain group of individuals to be my friends/interlocutors. The work above is a testimony to just the opposite. I met and befriended a wide range of people from the ultra-orthodox Beta Israel to those that do not believe in religion; small babies to elders around 95 years of age; Jews born Jews and Jews that converted; Jews in Haifa to Jews in Eilat. Each member of this community taught me something important about who they are and what their identities mean. Some things remained clear among all, such as the generations of Ethiopian tradition that continue to be present in the mindsets and societal expectations and values. Others presented the opposite, such as a more Western perspective of

what achievement is and a stronger identification with their Israeli heritage than their Ethiopian heritage.

As one person, I only saw so much, and was only able to form close relationships with a limited number of people. Each individual person I met represented themselves and their own subjectivities, not the community as a whole. Despite this important and vital fact of subjectivity and individuality, there are a multitude of themes and similarities that are visible based on the participant observation I conducted. Based on the fieldwork I partook in this summer, I present the following findings. These findings are important to the advancement of humanity, by gaining a broader understanding of humanity, and the experience which accompanies it, through culture.

The next generations of Beta Israel are not monolithic. One area this presents itself is in the difficulty of identifying the first and second generations. Many people around my age (twenty-two) were born in Ethiopia and many were born in Israel. Although there are slight differences apparent in their attitudes and knowledge of language, the separation between the two are not distinct because the majority of young adults were all raised in Israel. In this light, the first, second, and third generations are difficult to point out. Jacob's family came to Ethiopia with four generations of lineage, being him, his mother, grandmother, and great grandmother. Selam was born in Ethiopia and immigrated to Israel at age two, while two of her siblings were born later in Israel. Jacob can cook Ethiopian food, but so can Simcha, who was born in Israel. Selam speaks Amharic, but so do many of the second generation who were born in Israel. These examples underscore the notion that it is not about the place one is born that defines them, but rather the way that one preserves Ethiopian culture through the knowledge presented to them. They also explain my reasoning for calling the next generations as such.

The time spent with religious members of the next generations, like Rivka and Selam, illustrated for me the dynamics between religion and culture in the next generations. Most of the elders are deeply religious, as they brought their beliefs from Ethiopia to Israel. The next generations often grow up in different ways because although the household is religious, outside influences at school, work, and play offer different perspectives which allow them to reimagine possibilities.

Rivka and Selam, because they are more religious, view life through a traditional lens. They both hope to get married and have children as soon as possible, keep Shabbat and holidays strictly, and do not go to bars or parties. They spend a great amount of time helping their parents and siblings with aspects of daily life, while also prioritizing their own religious obligations. As their lives become embedded in religion and family obligations, tradition and religion become one and the same, leading some of the next generations to stay deeply connected to tradition and traditional values held among the Beta Israel.

Religion is the basis of life in Israeli society. Even if someone does not feel a strong connection to religion, it is nonetheless visible in both public and private spheres. Most homes have Shabbat dinner every Friday night, lighting candles and eating as a family. Public stores, transportation, and other facets of daily life pause for this Jewish day of rest. Whether people notice this or not, religion is seeped into everyone's life. This is maintained by both Israeli Jews and Ethiopian Jews. As evident by casual religious phrases, kissing the Mezuzah on every door post, and resting on Shabbat, these habits are unified in Beta Israel whether or not individuals are observant or religious. These practices have been consistently passed down, along with Ethiopian cultural habits of traditional greetings and cuisine. Although these habits of Ethiopian culture have been preserved, neither Rivka nor Selam wear the traditional kemis or make injera. They

both explain that they will learn how to make injera so it will be made in their household (which was expressed by every woman that I spoke to in the community), but they do not intend to wear the kemis when they get older, as seen in the wedding and the Bar Mitzvah chapters²⁸. Knowing this, it is likely that the kemis will die out with the first generation. This is significant because in Ethiopia, it was never a choice, revealing the shift in the ontological order of the community.

The wedding, being a mix of all ages, levels of observance of Judaism, and community members exhibited the true diversity in the community. The ceremony, led by the Kes, reminds us that the Kes not only still exists but is thriving despite them not being able to have a dominant role in Israel. Although the Kes does not have the role of a Rabbi with the accompanying status and social influence, there is a visible commitment to keep the Kes alive, as is seen with young men of the next generations learning the role of Kes. The Kes, who in Ethiopia was the leader of the community, continues. It is in a different form, but nonetheless continues to lead and shape the community, remaining a symbol of Beta Israel.

Another important element of the wedding I attended is the forehead kiss between the bride and groom, different from the kiss on the mouth seen in Western weddings. This underscores the taboo of showing affection in public spaces, even at one's wedding. The forehead kiss is most common at all Beta Israel weddings, with one extreme being ultra-Orthodox couples who do not kiss at all, and on the other end, more secular couples who kiss on the lips. I witnessed this recent shift to some couples kissing on the lips in the last couple of months through social media videos. This rapid change in just half a year from forehead kisses to kissing on the lips shows the unexpected pace at which social life for this community changes.

²⁸ Aside from the ritual henna event, which is rooted in tradition and culture.

Although modesty and respect for the elders is of utmost importance, something still prominent and visible in the community, the inevitable advance in culture allows for changes such as this to occur. The natural shift has slowly allowed the next generations to wear less traditional and modest clothing, to marry under seven degrees of separation, and now, to embrace physical affection in the public sphere. This shift would likely be progressing at a quicker pace if the respect for the elders was not so prominent.

Although the next generations are shifting their cultural norms in practice, their respect for the elders of the community is something that has never changed. It takes time for the elders to adjust to these continuous shifts, seen through constant expressions of negative sentiments, but it happens nonetheless and is eventually accepted. The elders are the rock of the community, and this is visible in the actions of the next generations. As mentioned in earlier chapters, aside from Jacob, no one smokes around the elders. It is taboo to curse in front of them, to yell or ignore them, or to dress immodestly in front of them, as visible in the instance my friend changed for a party at my place.

In addition to these norms, it is also expected for children to take on many responsibilities for their parents. Since the elders in the community immigrated at an older age and had a harder time adjusting, many do not speak Hebrew well. This leads to many older siblings of the next generations being the ones in charge of finances, dealing with doctor and hospital visits, and ensuring their younger siblings and cousins have everything they need for school. Oftentimes, many older siblings are the ones who go to the parent teacher meetings. One of my friends summed up her feeling of the situation, saying “We are the parents.” It is not that the parents do not provide for their children; they spend long hours at work and make a home for their family, teaching and supporting their children. They fulfilled the dream of reaching the land of Israel,

with and for their children, a trip and process that had an unfathomable impact on the elders of the community and the next generations. They risked their lives to get to Israel, and then experienced racism worse than they could have imagined. The dream was not the utopia they had pictured; they thought life would be perfect and found themselves faced with a whole new set of difficulties.

Kfar Beta Israel does work to repair the identity crisis the elders faced and continue to face in Israel. In Ethiopia, the elders found meaning and livelihoods in agriculture, which they do not have access to in the same way in Israel. Their previous experience in agriculture and other trades are largely irrelevant. Instead, most elders find themselves working blue-collar jobs that lead to embarrassment and shame. Kfar Beta Israel provides a nostalgic place of safety and security in which they can connect with the land and with each other, performing the buna ritual and eating injera together as they did in the villages in Ethiopia. The agency and the joy of life before is then given back to the elders with the help of the next generations.

Evidently, migration and assimilation into a new place led to uncertainty and a new set of trials and tribulations. The collision of peoples leads to problems, but with such collisions is the possibility to bring a new people; a mixture of things for both good and bad that can create something new and beautiful. This is exactly what the next generations of this community are achieving.

As seen in the work of Callactivit, Balinjera, and Kfar Beta Israel, there are organizations and groups in Israel doing the work to both embrace and reconnect to their Ethiopian culture while adapting into Israeli culture. Balinjera and Kfar Beta Israel were created with the goal of preserving the identities that many left behind in Ethiopia, while simultaneously ensuring the larger community is aware of the beauty and the history of the culture. Such work dispels

negative perceptions and stereotypes about the community in Israel, and the effects of this work are evident in Israeli society as a whole. Callactivit was created by the next generations of Beta Israel themselves, combating stereotypes and fostering collective growth and understanding within the community, a space of healing. It is also each individual that struggles both internally and externally, both honoring and transforming through the mere act of living itself.

The next generations of Beta Israel in Israel hold a liminal position in Israeli society: at once trying to integrate into Israeli culture while striving to preserve their Ethiopian culture. This leads to a reshaping of both the Beta Israel community and the Israeli society as a whole. This manifests in different shapes and forms in both the public and private sphere, like with Shabbat dinners at many houses in the community including both injera and Israeli foods. It is seen in the public sphere at weddings and Bar/Bat Mitzvot having Israeli and Western music and the integration of Israeli foods. Many of the next generations use their Hebrew names in public and their Ethiopian names in private. The blending of Israeli and Ethiopian cultures also leads to a fade in the latter. This liminal position is one of complexity, layered and murky, but in mud, just as botz shows us, something beautiful arises.

Despite the challenges and racism the community faces in Israel, individuals continue to learn about their histories and embrace their Ethiopian identities. Sigd was added to the national calendar of Israel in 2008, marking a step towards appreciation and visibility on a national scale. Now the community has a national day to celebrate, when families often get together. The buna ritual is less popular among the next generations, but it is still alive. In Ethiopia, the buna ceremony was conducted multiple times a day, and now, most of the community does not have time to do it every day because of work and school. The Beta Israel exemplifies the presence of

tradition and culture, of embracing change and making meaning out of one's life given the circumstances in which they find themselves.

The Beta Israel community is one of a kind. The hardships endured will not and cannot be forgotten, for without history one loses sight of who they are. May the memory of the four thousand Beta Israel that passed away on the aliyot to Israel be a blessing. May the work that both the first generations and the next generations do continue to saturate the new light that has been kindled. A new journey, a new country, a new life, and despite the numerous hardships, not one person of any age wanted to go back to Ethiopia. Israel is their home. The work of crafting a society that respects and appreciates all cultures is work that must be done in every country in the world, and it is worth noting the strides that the Beta Israel have taken towards this goal in Israel.

Afterword

A few hours before I had to go to the airport, Selam came to my apartment to pack. We then went to her house with all of my belongings from the summer. As an interlocutor, I gave many gifts over the months there, and I had one more. This one, I decided, was for the people that had the biggest impact on me. I took out the small sculpture, a colorful bird, and handed it to Selam's mom. "This is for you and your family. I came here alone, nervous, and unsure of myself, and I left with a family. You welcomed me into your home, into your life. You took me to events and taught me about your culture, you fed me and cared for me. You were my family in Israel when I had none." Her mom started crying and we embraced, realizing that the trip had come to an end and that I didn't know when I would see them next.

I pulled out of the hug, tears streaming down my face, as the kids made faces of complete shock. "She's crying! She's really crying!" I realized then that it is completely taboo to find an elder in the community in tears, aside from when losing a loved one. Her tears solidified the connection I mentioned at the beginning of the ethnography, about the elder from the parking lot party. She felt it too.

We look into each other's eyes, saying a million words yet none at all. She tells something to her husband in Amharic, who pulls out a 200-shekel bill and hands it to her, which she hands to me. I put my arms out in protest, saying it is impossible to take their money. The children all tell me that it is the most disrespectful thing I can do not to take it. I explain my difference in culture and how it is not something I can do, but they tell me I must, and I oblige. I thank them profusely, hugging the strangers from two months ago who are now my family. I went to the airport with Selam, who made sure I got to the plane safely, and I flew.

Little did I know, I was flying the whole time.

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