My Journey from Ethiopia

by Rabbi Dr. Sharon Shalom

My Ethiopian name is Zaude Tesfay. Today I am known as Sharon Zaude Shalom. I first heard of Eretz Yisrael when I was a small child in a village in Ethiopia, where I helped herd the sheep. When I asked where Jerusalem was, my grandfather pointed in the direction of the city for which we yearned. When I was only eight years old, I came to Israel by myself, with my aunt and uncle. As a child, I thought Jerusalem was made of gold. I dreamed of a land literally flowing with milk and honey, in which everyone was Jewish and the gentiles did not hate them.

Then, rumors began to fly around our village and others that Jews from Jerusalem had come to Sudan to help the Ethiopian Jews, the Beta Israel community, to go to Israel. The gates were open, and whoever wanted to leave could go. None of the villagers thought of waiting. We all did everything possible to get organized and start moving towards Jerusalem. Every item that could be sold, we sold. Whatever we couldn’t sell, we left behind in our clay huts. After 2,000 years, we began to internalize the idea that the road to Jerusalem was open. One night, when the sign to begin the journey was given, the residents of
several villages gathered at a meeting point and we began the historic trek.

Our hasty departure led to complications. In my family, we kept our donkeys, so sometimes we rode, but most of the group journeyed on foot. We walked for over two months from Ethiopia to Sudan, exposed to the dangers of the road. People were certain they would reach Jerusalem within a short time but some were forced to wait in the Twawa refugee camp in Sudan for as long as six years. Conditions in the camp were harsh – it was overcrowded, and the sanitary situation was deplorable. Thousands died of disease. The Mossad and Jewish Agency Aliyah representatives did their best to help the interned Ethiopian Jews. They worked to improve conditions and speed up the stream of Aliyah, all the while operating under stressful conditions and a heavy pall of secrecy and fear. They also had to be careful not to arouse the attention of the presidential Sudanese soldiers.

My family was in the camp, and we were told we would have to wait two or three years for our turn. The mortality rate among children in the camp was particularly high, so some of the parents decided to send their children ahead, to try to save their lives. I was the eldest child in my family. At eight years old, I was told to go with my aunt and uncle to Jerusalem. I was torn between my love for my family and my love for Jerusalem. I followed my parents’ wishes. Along with hundreds of other children and adults, I was packed into a crowded truck. The floor of the truck was covered with a heavy tarp, and we were off.

Conditions inside the truck were foul. It was crowded and hot. People vomited, and the smell was unbearable. No one dared make a sound. Even the children and babies were silent as if they also realized the enormity of the moment and sensed they could put our lives at risk. We didn’t know where they were taking us or how much longer we would have to travel like this. Finally, the truck stopped, and we heard a very loud noise outside. The tarp was lifted from the truck floor and we climbed out.

It was very dark and the roar intensified. I had no idea what it was. Then I saw an amazing sight, something I had never seen before. Water, water and more water rising and writhing like an unfed beast. This was like the shore of the Red Sea – my first glimpse of the ocean. It moved toward us, jaws open, and I can barely describe my fear of the powerful waves pounding towards me. I didn’t know they would stop the moment they reached the shore. Then suddenly a miracle happened. From out of nowhere, from deep within the darkness and the fog, the tumult and the confusion, a team of Israeli Navy commandos rose up out of the sea. They shed tears, and we cried too. A meeting of brothers separated for 2,000 years.

The soldiers loaded us onto rubber boats. It was a dark night, and the boats floated silently into the sea. After a while, the boat reached what I thought was a large, well-lit building – actually an Israeli naval ship. We climbed up through the belly of the boat. Some kissed the deck, convinced they had arrived in Jerusalem. Only the next day, when the sun rose, did we realize we were on the deck of a ship in the middle of the ocean. We sailed to Sharm el-Sheikh in the southern Sinai Peninsula. There they took us off the boat and bussed us to the local airport. From there, we flew to Ben-Gurion Airport, our gateway to the promised Jerusalem – the dream was about to become a reality.

So in January 1982, I found myself standing in front of an Immigration Ministry clerk at Ben-Gurion Airport. Through a translator, he asked me my name and age. I was at a loss for words. Two years previously, in Sudan, I had acted without a word, and here again, I lost the power of speech. I barely managed to whisper my name.

After an absence of 2,500 years, the Ethiopian Jewish community has merited a return to our homeland.

“May our eyes behold Your return to Zion in mercy.”

We have come home.

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