

Memorial Day for Ethiopian Jews who perished on their way to Israel

On the 28th of Iyar, the State of Israel also marks the memorial day for members of the Ethiopian Jewish community who perished on their way to Israel.

A mass emigration of Ethiopian Jews ("Beta Israel") took place in the years 1980-1984, from their villages in the area of Gundar and through Sudan. Many of them, who had dreamed for many years of making Aliyah to Israel, managed to flee Ethiopia and arrive at the Ethiopian-Sudanese border, where they waited in provisional camps to make Aliyah. The passage through Sudan was made possible by an unspoken agreement, known only to a few senior officials in Sudan. Agents of the Mossad awaited the immigrants at the Sudanese border and instructed them to hide their Jewish identity.

On their escape routes and in the Sudanese camps, they suffered from disease, hunger and acts of harassment, rape, and violent robberies. The families, with their elderly and younger members, walked for long periods of up to several months and were forced to wait in refugee camps in Sudan for up to two years until they could be rescued and brought to Israel.

Approximately 4,000 members of the community perished on the way and in the camps, in their attempt to arrive at Israel. The instructions they were given by the Mossad agents to conceal their Jewish identity made it difficult for them to observe the laws of kashrut and ritual purity; in the desert, they could not bury their dead for fear of robbers, and in their camps, they could not perform Jewish burial ceremonies for fear of the Sudanese guards.

Operation Moses, the first national operation for bringing Ethiopian Jewry to Israel, began in November 1984. The operation was done in secret and brought over some 8,000 Ethiopian Jews on Israeli aircraft. A leak of information to the Israeli press brought the operation to an end before schedule. Many families were left behind, torn apart and separated; they remained there until May 1991, when 14,324 immigrants were brought within 36 hours during Operation Solomon.

In 1989, the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption erected a temporary memorial for the Ethiopian Jews who perished on the way to Israel. This memorial was set up at Kibbutz Ramat Rachel, with the help of the Jewish National Fund (KKL-JNF) and the Jewish Agency. In late 2003, the Ministerial Committee for Immigration, Absorption and the Diaspora decided that a permanent memorial would be established at Mt. Herzl. The government decided that a national memorial ceremony for those who perished would be held each year on the 28th of Iyar, Jerusalem Day.

In March 2007, the memorial for Ethiopian Jews who perished on the way to Israel was dedicated in the southern part of Mt. Herzl. The area surrounding the memorial serves as a gathering place in which people can cherish the memory of the courage and the loss of the thousands of Ethiopian Jews who perished on their way to Israel.