

[chant] *Shir HaShirim asher l'Shlomo.*

“The Song of Songs by Solomon.

Oh give me the kisses of your mouth

For your love is sweeter than wine.

The king has brought me to his chambers

Shechora ani v'nava - I am black and beautiful

O daughters of Jerusalem.”

[from Shir HaShirim 1: 1-5]

“The queen of Sheba heard of Solomon’s fame and she came to test him with hard questions. She arrived in Jerusalem with a very large retinue, with camels bearing spices, a great quantity of gold, and precious stones. Solomon had answers for all her questions; there was nothing that the king did not know, nothing to which he could not give her an answer...

It took her breath away. She said to the king, ‘The report I heard in my own land about your wealth and wisdom was true. But I did not believe the reports until I came and saw with my own eyes that not even half had been told me; your wisdom and wealth surpass the reports I heard...Praised be the Lord your God who delighted in you and set you on the throne of Israel.’

She presented the king with one hundred and twenty talents of gold, and a large quantity of spices, and precious stones. Never again did such a vast quantity of spices arrive as that which the queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon...King Solomon, in turn, gave the queen of Sheba everything she wanted and asked

for...Then she and her attendants left and returned to her own land.” [from 1 Kings 10: 1-13]

Her own land was the land of Ethiopia. In the Ethiopian version of this Biblical story, the beautiful black queen returns from the encounter with King Solomon pregnant with his child. The son she bears becomes Menelik the First, first in the line of the Solomonic kings of Ethiopia. When Menelik grows up and becomes a young man, Ethiopians say, he traveled to Jerusalem to meet his father, King Solomon, to learn from his wisdom and to claim his patrimony. And when he was ready to return to Ethiopia. Solomon sent him home with 1,000 men from each of the twelve tribes of Israel – and another gift, the Ark of the Covenant from the Temple in Jerusalem.

This is the foundational story of Ethiopia. It's everywhere. If you fly Ethiopian Airlines, you can sign up for their frequent flier program and get Sheba Miles. And everyone talks about the Ark of the Covenant. Remember - the Ark of the Covenant that Solomon sent with Menelik? It eventually came to rest in the northern Ethiopian town of Axum. It is housed in a chapel that is inside a building that is surrounded by a compound. A hermit monk sits in front of the building day and night. His food is brought to him. When he dies, another hermit takes his place. No one sees the ark. Ever.

Is it there? Maybe. It is unlikely that Solomon gave the Ark as a gift to anyone. But several centuries later, the Temple that Solomon built was destroyed by the Babylonians. When our Bible lists the items that the Babylonians looted from the Temple, the Ark is missing from the list. And we know that when the

Second Temple was rebuilt, there was no longer an ark in its Holy of Holies. Was it whisked away to safety before the Babylonian destruction? Secreted away to Elephantine Island in southern Egypt – where there was a Jewish colony? And then moved to Ethiopia? Maybe.

On a June morning this summer, at 5:00 am, the world still pitch black, David and I gathered with thousands of villagers in this town of Axum in northern Ethiopia, to circle the compound of the Ark of the Covenant. Priests dressed in white, carrying a replica of the ark, covered with a cloth – followed in slow procession by thousands of people also dressed in white, carrying white candles flickering in the darkness, walking, chanting – the two kilometer path circling this sacred center of holiness.

Mystery.

Is the Ark of the Covenant there? Maybe. But more important, the story is there. Every single Ethiopian Orthodox Church is built on the model of the Temple in Jerusalem. Each church has three parts: the outer part for the chanters, the center chamber for the priests – and then a curtain which separates those sections from the Holy of Holies that contains a replica of the ark with a tablet of the Ten Commandments.

Ethiopian Orthodox Christians don't eat pork; they circumcise their baby boys on the eighth day; the primary languages of Ethiopia – Amharic and Tigrinya – are Semitic. The language of prayer, Ge'ez, is Semitic.

Mystery.

And in this land of mystery is another mystery. The story of the Jews of Ethiopia. There are different versions of how they arrived ; perhaps they descend from the Israelites sent by King Solomon to accompany Menelik on his homeward bound journey, three thousand years ago. Perhaps they fled Jerusalem at the time of the destruction of Solomon's Temple, 2,500 years ago – fleeing southward toward the Arabian Peninsula, and from Yemen, crossing the narrow straits of the Red Sea into Ethiopia. Whatever the story, there are other clues for the authenticity of an ancient Jewish presence in Ethiopia.

Our own Jewish traditions took a radical turn when the Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans 2,000 years ago. Priests were replaced by rabbis; sacrifices were replaced by prayer and learning; and the home – not the temple - became the locus of sanctity. You and I – regular people – made moments of daily life holy with blessings: blessings for waking up, for eating, for lighting candles and for celebrating holidays. Biblical Judaism evolved into Rabbinic Judaism. So let's be detectives with this mystery: If the Ethiopian Jews had in fact been in Ethiopia for **more** than two thousand years – and if they remained isolated from the rest of world-wide Jewry (as indeed they were), we would expect their Jewish practice to look more like Biblical Judaism than the later Rabbinic Judaism that we practice.

And so it is: Ethiopian Jews continued to practice ritual sacrifice of animals; they still had priests; the Torah's laws of purity and impurity were a high priority for them: menstruating girls and women sat in a separate hut for seven days (for those of you who have read *The Red Tent*, this will have resonance);

though they did not cook milk and meat together (a Biblical prohibition), they knew of no other separation of milk and meat; and they had no idea about Hanukkah (a post-Biblical holiday) until being airlifted to Israel.

Clues surely to an ancient mystery. Glimpses into our own past.

Jews made their home in Ethiopia for thousands of years, and like us, they faced Jerusalem when they prayed. And more than us, they dreamt of a return to their home. Since the early 1980's, they have begun the journey home. In clandestine operations in 1983-1984, Ethiopian Jews walked under the cover of night and in harrowing conditions over the Simien Mountains into Sudan, where they were airlifted to Israel. 12,000 set out on the journey; 4,000 died along the way. Israel was poised to try again. Seven years later that moment came. Just as the Mengistu regime was about to be toppled by rebel forces, the Israeli military carried out Operation Solomon. Of course. The Ethiopian Jews were going home.

In thirty-six hours, 34 Israeli planes flew non-stop – cargo jets, El Al passenger jets, Israeli Air Force Hercules transport planes. “In order to accommodate as many people as possible, airplanes were stripped of their seats and immigrants were squashed into the plane, with as many as one thousand two hundred in a plane. Many of the immigrants carried nothing with them except their clothes and cooking instruments...” [Wikipedia, “Operation Solomon.”] Five babies were born on the planes. It was the largest single movement of any

population ever in human history – 15,000 people in 36 hours - and the first time that Africans were brought out of Africa to freedom.

They are ours – and they are part of our story.

[Lia – comes up to bima]

Shalom. My name is Leah Heillo.

I am very happy to be here to share my story with you. As a Jew, I always heard about Jerusalem at home, when I was a little girl. Jerusalem for us was a dream, and before 1984 the only way to get to Jerusalem was by walking from Ethiopia through Sudan. When you do that, you take the risk of losing your family members on the way. 4,000 Ethiopian Jews lost their lives on their way to their dream, Jerusalem. My family waited in Ethiopia until Israel opened her gates for Ethiopian Jews. In 1989 When I was 3 years old , my family decided to immigrate to Israel. In order to immigrate we had to go to the capital city, Addis Ababa , where the Israeli embassy was located.

After two years in Addis Ababa, on the morning of May 24, 1991 without warning we were told about Operation Solomon. That morning my father wasn't at home and we couldn't leave without him, so we missed Operation Solomon. My family had to stay in Ethiopia and wait for 5 more years. My brother who was 18 years old and married made the aliya with his wife's family.

It was difficult to stay in Addis Ababa, a strange city for us with hard conditions. As temporary citizens in Addis Ababa, we rented very low quality apartments in a slum that was near the embassy, from people who hated us only because we were Jewish.

In December 1995 we got permission to immigrate to Israel. It was exciting, even though we all felt tired. That month, we finally arrived to Israel to the city called Haifa, where the absorption Center was located.

After two years in the absorption center we bought a house with the support of the country .We couldn't buy a big house because of the very limited budget. so we bought a house with 3 little bedrooms for 11 people, but the size didn't bother us and we just loved our house, because since we left Gonder in 1989 we didn't have a real home . Now we have our own house that we can stay in forever in our country.

When we moved to the new house I was 11 years old At age 12 after I finished my primary school , I took the entrance exam in the Reali high school, a private high school that is one of the best in the country. I passed the exams and even received a scholarship for the full time until I finished my studies there. I finished my studies there with high grades which let me to continue to the Technion , where my older brother finished his studies at the mechanical engineering department.

Before I started my studies at the Technion I served two years at the army. When I finished my military service I started my studies in the civil engineering department. As a student who was supported by a scholarship, I had to work a few hours a week at some community center. As someone who immigrated to Israel, I took this opportunity to work at the absorption center that was nearest the Technion so that I could help other new immigrants.

When I first immigrated, I thought that in Israel, I would never feel again discriminated or hated because of who I am. I was wrong because if in Ethiopia i was different as a Jew, here I was too black and not Jewish enough. It was very disappointing and hurtful but I decided to fight it and to be part of the society in Israel and help people understand and accept me as who I am by teaching them about me, my origins and that I may be different but that we all are different from one another.

In this way I succeeded to be part of Israeli society I know that I could have acted in other ways that could make me stay separate from the society, never being part of it. I have chosen otherwise, to work on being part of it.

As someone who works at the absorption center I was able to prepare the kids for Israeli life and make it smoother than mine. I wish I had more time to teach what I knew from my

experiences. About a year ago, I met Chana, the head and founder of an organization called Kaleidoscope. She was able to bring my experiences, feeling and thoughts into the Kaleidoscope program which helps people in Israel to understand each other's cultures. For example, Kaleidoscope helps Arabs and Jews and new immigrants and native Israelis understand one another. But first we have to understand and be sure of who we are. I was very happy to hear about the aim of the program and to take part of it .I have had a great opportunity to work in Kaleidoscope, support the new immigrants as they begin to feel good about being in Israel while feeling good about being Ethiopian. I am happy to be here with you. I see it as part of my journey. I believe that all Jews all over the world should know about Ethiopian Jews so that my children would never feel unaccepted because of their ethnic origins and differences. I think that learning to be more accepting is a very important message, especially today on Rosh Hashana. I hope that we all work on a new year of accepting and respecting differences.

It was this mystery that drew David and me to Ethiopia this summer. We arrived in Gondar, the province of northern Ethiopia that had been home for the Jews for millennia, in time for Shabbat. Hundreds of men, women, teens and children gathered in the huge, open, corrugated shed – which is the center of the Jewish Community Compound in Ethiopia. The men draped in white cloths; the women dressed entirely in white – seated separately. A woman walked to the front to light Shabbat candles. What do you do when you only have one pair of candles for an entire community? She lit the candles, covered her eyes and called out **Baruch!**

Baruch, everyone said. **Ata – ata! Adonai – Adonai!**

Overwhelming and moving. I knew the words – as you would. **Asher kidshanu bi'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Shabbat.**

Here, in the heart of Africa, I was one with them. We were one people; we had stood together once at the foot of Mt. Sinai and had spread all over the world.

Who are we? Who were we? Were we once black? "*Shehora ani v'nava – b'not yerushalayim*"; I am black and beautiful O daughters of Jerusaem. I don't mean to be asking a silly question: those of us who are today white-skinned were not black two – or three – or four or five thousand years ago. *Shechora Ani* – I am black. Black is part of our story. The Ethiopian Jews were isolated from the rest of world-wide Jewry for so long that they thought they were the last remaining Jews on the earth. When they arrived in Israel they were shocked to find out that not only were there so many Jews, but that most of them were white!

What does it mean to look at the other and to see oneself?

Here, in the heart of Africa, I was one with them. We were one people; we had stood together once at the foot of Mt. Sinai and had spread all over the world.

But I didn't always feel that way. I grew up in America's segregated South. Raised in Richmond, Virginia, the capital of the Confederacy, I sang "Dixie" every morning of my public elementary school years. Though my parents fought against segregation and worked actively and publicly for Civil Rights, I carried within me the unconscious ever-present racism which is part of our world. When I was ten, my family traveled to Israel for a year. I remember walking home one afternoon, uphill, along a beautiful Jerusalem street, and realizing something unusual about what I was seeing across the street. A black man was walking down on the other side of the street, in turban and robes. What was unusual was

that I had never seen or expected a black man walk that way. He was tall, and he walked proudly – like a prince – which he probably was – an African prince on his way to a consulate or embassy office. And I understood for the first time the racism and prejudices that I carry inside me.

The challenges of seeing ourselves in the other are present right here for us in these United States. This past July, millions of Americans anxiously followed the trial of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin. After his acquittal, President Barack Obama reflected on race and prejudice here in the United States:

There are very few African-American men in this country who haven't had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store. That includes me.

There are probably very few African-American men who haven't had the experience of walking across the street and hearing the locks click on the doors of cars. That happens to me - at least before I was a senator.

There are very few African-Americans who haven't had the experience of getting on an elevator and a woman clutching her purse nervously and holding her breath until she had a chance to get off. That happens often. And then, finally, I think it's going to be important for all of us to do some soul-searching. You know, there's been talk about, should we convene a conversation on race? I haven't seen that be particularly productive when, you know, politicians try to organize conversations. They end up being stilted and politicized, and folks are locked into the positions they already have.

On the other hand, in families and churches and workplaces, there's a possibility that people are a little bit more honest and at least you ask yourself your own questions about, am I wringing as much bias out of myself as I can? Am I judging people as much as I can based on not the color of their skin, but the content of their character? That would, I think, be an appropriate exercise in the wake of this tragedy.

President Barack Obama – speech, July 19th, 2013

There are now more than 120,000 Ethiopian Jews living in Israel, a third of whom were born in the land of Israel. In the last few years, Israel has seen its first Ethiopian members of the Knesset, Israel's parliament, and the last Miss Israel was Ethiopian – black and beautiful. Israel is not without its problems of prejudice and racism. Ethiopian Jews still struggle more than any other group within Israel with unemployment, under-education, poverty, crime and suicide.

Being Jewish means being part of a family. Whether by birth, or conversion (which is like adoption), this is our family forever. And like any family, we can love them, we can hate them, we can even leave them – but they are still our family. It's who we are. White and brown, black and beautiful. There are still 1,600 families left behind from Operation Solomon. They are the Falash Mura, members of the Jewish community who converted to Christianity under pressure a century ago. Many of them are still Jewish by patrilineal descent. These 1,600 families have been part of the Jewish community for a decade or more. They are the ones we met at Shabbat services in Gondar. They have made the long road back from Christianity to Judaism. They speak Hebrew, they wear kippot and tzitzit, they have cast their lot with the Jewish people; and for their children being Jewish is the only life they've known. They have been living in poverty, as internal refugees, as they wait for permission to make aliyah to Israel. David and I went to Ethiopia to witness the triumphant end of the Ethiopian Aliyah to the land of Israel; we didn't know we would be face to face with heartbreak. There is so much heartbreak in the world. There is racism and brokenness and prejudice – in us and in the world. But we are not helpless.

As Jews, we have a mandate to hope, to act and to heal. Israel's national anthem is "Hatikvah" – the Hope. We believe in hope; we believe in each person; we believe in creating a society where each person brings their gifts and blessings to create a better world. So many Ethiopian Jews never made it to the Promised Land. Others made it through unbelievable obstacles – but could not surmount the obstacles once they arrived. And there are still those who are left behind in Ethiopia. We have much work to do together.

We will be better Jews – we will be better people – if we reach beyond ourselves. This year at Kol Ami we will immerse ourselves in these stories, watch the documentaries, meet the filmmakers, advocate on behalf of the Ethiopian Jews left behind, and renew our connections with Israel, and address the intersection of race, poverty and homelessness right here in Westchester County – facing and healing the prejudices we carry within .

Shechora ani v'nava - I am black and beautiful. We are black and beautiful. We are Jewish - we are Jewish together – and we have been given life in order to bless and heal this world.