In Memory of Those Who Died Crossing The Sudan

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Salamno! – That's Amharic for "Shalom Aleichem!"

Menachem and I sat on the patio of the Goha hotel, enjoying our breakfast as we looked out across the rolling hills of Gondar, with its buildings and village huts spread across them like a rumpled sheet. Subtle ripples of color shimmered over the mountain ridges in the background.

As we left the hotel, we passed a series of large photographs in the lobby. Beneath all but one there was a caption explaining the photo. Menachem pointed to that last photograph, a portrait of an Ethiopian woman. "She is an Ethiopian Jew," he said to me. "The last government forced the hotel to take down the caption." I noted to myself that this occurred many years ago. It seems after the fall of Communism no one — in the current government or the hotel -- cared enough to restore the Jewish woman's story and her dignity. She remains the only anonymous person on the wall, a nameless representation of a people now virtually gone from the landscape.

If the woman in the picture could speak, she would have a proud but painful story to tell.

There are several theories about the origin of Ethiopian Jewry. Ethiopians themselves hold that Ethiopian Jews are descended from the first king of Ethiopia, Menelik I, who was the son of King Solomon and Queen Sheba and 400 Israelite soldiers who accompanied Menelik home. In fact, Ethiopians believe that every emperor of Ethiopia throughout the centuries –from Menelik I right down to Haile Selassie – was descended from the line of David and Solomon. Medieval and early modern palaces are decorated with stars of David and Lions of Judah can be found everywhere in the country in art and public monuments.

There was a Jewish Kingdom in Ethiopia from the 7th century BCE until the 4th century CE, when Emperor Ezana converted to Christianity. Wide-spread persecution of the Jews followed, until the Jews overthrew the government and re-established independence under Queen Yeodit in the 9th century.

The Jews ruled for three more centuries. Then Egypt joined forces with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to overthrow the Jewish government. Countless Jews were murdered, forced to convert or sold into slavery. From the 14th century onward, Jews were forced to live as powerless, exploited, landless peasants. In 1624, at the same time Muslims were rebelling against forced conversion by the Church, the Jews once again rebelled and briefly regained independence, only to be brutally defeated by the Ethiopian army which this time was backed by the Portuguese, who were carrying out the Inquisition.

That war ended in a mass suicide. Men and women fought to the death. They threw themselves off mountain precipices or cut each other's throats rather than be taken prisoner and forced to convert. The Ethiopians burned all the Jews' sacred books. Those Jews captured alive were sold into slavery, forced to be baptized, and once again denied the right to own land. The Jews fled into the hill country of Gondar and other surrounding areas. They developed specialties in

certain skills – pottery and weaving – which were known as the Jews' trades, likely the only trades they were allowed to engage in.

When the communists took over Ethiopia in the 20th century, they continued the policy of keeping the Jews landless. The practice of Judaism and the teaching of Hebrew were forbidden, members of the community were arrested on fabricated charges of being Zionist spies, and their religious leaders were harassed and monitored. Thousands died.

It was against this background that Menachem Begin first sought to bring the Ethiopian Jews home to Israel. That story is too long to recount in full today – the first 200 Ethiopian Jews that left on an Israeli plane bringing weapons as a bribe to the communists, Operation Moses in which thousands walked barefoot across the Sudan to waiting planes, and later Operation Solomon. As of 2006 nearly 80,000 Ethiopian Jews have made Aliyah. This year we are witnessing the last wave of this immigration, the Falash Mura: descendants of Jews long ago forcibly converted to Christianity. That's a topic for another sermon.

I contemplate this history as we leave our hotel. We meet up with a young man, Max, who is teaching English in Gondar and works on the side for the JDC. His family donated the school I spoke about on Shabbat. But Max wants to show us something else today. He guides the driver through the country-side past oxen, past women walking, carrying bushels of various crops – or jugs of water -- on their heads, covered in white wraps, past barefoot children playing on the side of the road. Ahead of us, a village looms on both sides of the road. On the left, round homes with cone shaped tops. The sides are made or branches plastered over in mud, the tops made of corrugated tin. On the right, set back from the road, rectangular buildings made of tin and concrete. On both sides of the road, big painted stars of David and signs that read "Falasha Village" in English urging us to stop. Welcome to Walleka.

We pull over and enter a woman's craft cooperative. As we stand in a room filled with pottery, a woman explains to us the history of their project. She tells the legend of how Menelik I returned to Ethiopia with 400 soldiers. "Their descendants," she says, "were the Falashas. They lived here and were known for their expertise in unique forms of pottery and craft. But they all wanted to go to Israel and now they have gone. The government gave us their village so that we could learn and continue their style of pottery. Come, let me show you the workshop."

That was it. No mention of the proud independent Jewish kingdoms, of Ethiopia's storied Jewish past. No mention of religious persecution, of restrictions of trade. No mention of the fact that the land the government gave them never belonged to the Jews; the Jews had lived were forced to live landless as sharecroppers working for their non-Jewish neighbors. Max's father presses the woman harder, asking the tough questions: "What does the word Falasha mean?" "Isn't it true that Falasha means outsider and that they were persecuted and hated because they were Jewish?" "Not allowed to own land?" "Demonized and ostracized?" Finally, she breaks. She throws her hands up in the air. "Yes," she says, "some people say that they were hated and mistreated but I do not know anything about that." As she speaks, she looks away from us, unable to meet our gaze. Her eyes tell a different story.

And suddenly my mind is flooded with memories of conversations I had with guides in Poland and the Czech Republic, on various synagogue missions. Yes, they had each said, the Holocaust was terrible but it wasn't *them*. There was no anti-Semitism in Czech or in Poland, we were told, though the leader of the Czech Jewish community told us that the remaining Jews refused to put their names on a community roster out of fear for their lives even today. In Poland it was left to us to remind Magda, our guide, about the Polish government's anti-Jewish campaign that began in 1967 and by 1971 had driven almost 13,000 of the remaining Jews Poland. The government confiscated all their property. The Jewish quarter in Krakow is alive with Jewish food and Klezmer music – non-Jewish Poles strangely reveling in the very culture they helped to expunge from their midst. I am standing in Walleka but I might as well be standing in Krakow. The story is the same.

We leave the village of Walleka and travel up the road, then hike down a dry river bed and across to the other side. There, tucked away in a small clearing in the forest is a cemetery with maybe 50 graves. Traditional Ethiopian Jewish graves are marked with a pile of small stones which wash away in winter rains and must be replaced. But this cemetery was different. The graves were all covered in large raised slab and a western style headstone, made of concrete. The tops of many of the slabs were embossed with large stars of David. On many tombstones there are painted more stars of David, as well as the seal of the State of Israel and the Seal of Jerusalem.

A large sign posted in English, Hebrew and Amharic explains: Here are buried Jews who had died attempting the dangerous trek across the Sudan to the planes waiting to take them to Israel. These brave men, woman and children faced the threats of heat and dehydration, wild animals, bandits and Sudanese soldiers. Many made it to Israel, but these individuals had died or been killed along the way. Some of the stones bore names and other information in Hebrew or more often in Amharic. Many of the stones were unmarked, perhaps reflecting that those who buried them were unsure of their identity, sure only that they were their brothers and sisters who had lived as Jews and died al Kiddush Ha-shem, for the sanctification of God's name. Alongside the graves is a huge pile of boulders reaching perhaps ten feet in the air, an artistic variation on a traditional Ethiopian Jewish cemetery. The sign explains it was created by non-Jewish children from Gondar along with children from an Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel, in memory of the fallen.

We stand in silence for some length of time, and then join together in the words of the Mourner's Kaddish. Standing there, I am reminded of the words of Ezer Weizman to the German Bundestag in 1996, words Rabbi Rudin Luria taught on the first day of Pesach:

"I was a slave in Egypt.
I received the Torah at Mount Sinai.
Together with Joshua and Elijah, I crossed the Jordan River.
I entered Jerusalem with David, was exiled from it with Zedekiah, and did not forget it by the rivers of Babylon.
When the Lord returned the captives of Zion, I dreamed among the builders of its ramparts.
I fought the Romans and was banished from Spain.
I was bound to the stake in Mainz.

I studied Torah in Yemen and lost my family in Kishinev.
I was incinerated in Treblinka, rebelled in Warsaw, and emigrated to the Land of Israel, the country from where I had been exiled and where I had been born, from which I come and to which I return."

I would add: I was a Jew from Walleka too, robbed of my land, my livelihood and my pride. Demonized and ostracized, I too fled into the Sudan, God willing to reach Zion or to die trying to fulfill my ancestral dream. Their history is my history, their memories bound up with mine, our past and our destiny shared.

As we drove back into town, I thought about my own family, how they had come to America fleeing persecution in Eastern Europe. It does not matter where a Jew is from – Cleveland or Jerusalem, Warsaw or Madrid, Istanbul or Gondar – it is astounding how similar our family stories are. We are bound together by history and by faith, by holidays and by custom, by persecution and by suffering, by our hopes and our dreams and our determination to make those dreams reality.

I thought about the families of those buried by the riverbed outside the village of Walleka. I pictured them standing in synagogue today for Yizkor, sad over their loss, but buoyed by the thought of how happy it would make their loved ones to know they had fulfilled their dream of reaching Zion.

And then I thought of those we would be remembering in our synagogue today as we say Yizkor. Some of them were themselves survivors of the Holocaust or other times of persecution, some died creating and defending the Jewish State, some of them struggled against other challenges in their lives – illness, finances, family challenges. Many of them served as a model for us through their love, their values and their humility, through the sacrifices they made for us, or by their commitment to Torah and Jewish life, or their commitment to Israel, or the compassion they demonstrated in their generosity to those in need. It is from our memories of our loved ones that we draw the strength to dream, the ability to strive for a better life for ourselves and our children, to work for a flourishing homeland for our people, to work for a better world for all.

And I thought to myself: May the story of these brave Ethiopian Jews buried here – and the story of those who returned here from Israel to bury them – inspire us to keep alive our stories of our loved ones and to be inspired by them in our own lives as we rise now for Yizkor.