

Schusterman Center for Israel Studies

My Story – Rabbi Dr. Sharon Shalom

[My Story - Rabbi Dr. Sharon Shalom | Visiting Faculty and Scholars | About the Center | Schusterman Center for Israel Studies | Brandeis University](#)

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My Ethiopian name is Zaude Tesfay, and 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. I was certain that my parents were dead, and I went to live as an orphan in a children's home in Afula.

As a child in Ethiopia, I thought that Jerusalem was made of gold. I dreamed of a land of milk and honey, in which everyone was Jewish and the gentiles did not hate them.

In the village, we continued dreaming of Jerusalem. Rumors began to fly around our village and others that Jews from Jerusalem had come to Sudan in order to help the Ethiopian Jews, the Beta Israel community, to go to Israel. The gates were open, and whoever wanted to leave could go ahead. None of the villagers thought of waiting. We all did everything possible to get organized and start moving in order to go up to Jerusalem. Every item that could be sold, we sold. Whatever we couldn't sell, we left behind in our clay huts. After two thousand 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 began the great trek to Jerusalem.

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 in reality, some of them 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 sanitary conditions were deplorable. The path from this situation to outbreaks of infectious diseases was short. Thousands died of disease. In consideration of this situation, 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. On the one hand, they tried to push up the pace of aliyah, while on the other, they had to be careful not to arouse the attention of the soldiers of Jaafar Nimeiri, president of Sudan.

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 of them to Israel, 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, adults, and elderly, I was packed into a crowded truck. The bed of the truck was covered with a heavy tarp, and we were off.

Conditions inside the truck were foul. It was terribly crowded and hot. People vomited, and

the smell was unbearable. No one dared to make a sound. Even the children and babies were silent, as if they also realized they had to keep silent, or else put all of our lives at risk. We didn't know where they were taking us or how much longer we would have to travel in this horrific state. Finally, the truck stopped, and we heard a powerful racket outside. The tarp was lifted from the truck bed, and we climbed out. The roar intensified. I had no idea what it was. Then I saw an amazing sight, something I had never seen before. I saw water, more and more water that erupted and writhed fearfully. This was the shore of the Red Sea – my first glimpse of the ocean. It looked like a wild beast that hadn't been fed for weeks, and it moved toward us, jaws open, but from inside a cage that confined it. I can hardly describe my fear at the sight of the powerful waves pounding toward me – I didn't know they would stop the moment they reached the shore. Then suddenly a miracle

happened. From out of this nowhere, from deep within the darkness and the fog, the tumult and the confusion, commandos from unit 13 of the Israeli navy rose up out of the sea. They shed tears, and we cried along with them. It was a meeting of two brothers who had been separated for two thousand 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 – an Israeli naval ship. The boat passengers climbed up through the belly of the boat onto the high deck. Some of them kissed the deck, convinced they had arrived in Jerusalem. Only the next day, when the sun rose, did we realize that we were on the deck of a boat in the middle of the ocean. We sailed to Sharm el-Sheikh in the southern Sinai Peninsula. Then we were taken off the boat and driven in buses to the local airport. From there, we flew to Ben-Gurion

airport, our gate to the promised Jerusalem – the first step in a reality that for many years had been only a dream.

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

For over two thousand years, our people recited the prayer “May our eyes behold Your return to Zion in mercy.” After an absence of 2500 years, the Ethiopian Jewish community has merited the return to our homeland. We have returned to our home. This is why, when I stood before the Immigration Ministry clerk at the airport and was asked my name and age, my throat was choked and I could barely utter my name.

I went to live in a children's home in Afula. At one point, I received the bitter news that my parents were no longer alive. For two years, I lived with the knowledge that I would continue in this world without my family. The Emunah Children's Center provided for all my needs, and my aunt and uncle, Btouli and Tedu Sisay, whom I did not know in Ethiopia, became my family. Then one day, the children's center director, Baruch Vasen, called me to his office urgently. I went in and sat down cautiously, petrified I had done something wrong. Then he told me that the news I had received two years earlier about my parents' death had been a mistake. My entire family was alive, and the night before they had made aliyah in a major IDF operation (Operation Moses).

I took a shower and put on new clothes in preparation for the meeting. My counselor, Gabi Ohayon, drove me to the immigration office in Or Akiva. That trip, which took just half an

hour, seemed like an eternity to me. We got out of the car and walked toward the immigration center. Tense with anticipation, we quickly found the right house. We knocked on the door, and my mother opened it. We embraced and wept, and I felt that I was experiencing the miracle of the Resurrection.

When I arrived in Israel, there were very few Ethiopian Jews in the country, and I felt foreign and strange. I had the constant feeling that people were looking at me, thinking I was a character who had come out of a popular Israeli children's book, *The Little Black Boy Goes to Kindergarten*. I felt different, foreign. I remembered that feeling of otherness from when I was still in Ethiopia, from the other side of the coin. When a representative of the Jewish Agency came to our village, we considered him a feregi – a foreigner. Still, we desperately wanted to meet him, because he was a Jew who came from Jerusalem. In Israel, it was difficult

for me to reconcile the difference between the dream of Jerusalem and the reality. But I know it was harder for the adults than it was for me, a child.

My identity became a central question. Who was I? In Ethiopia I was identified as a Jew of Beta Israel. They called me “Israel.” But ironically, here in Israel I was called “Ethiopian.” To me, it was a jarring experience to discover I was an Ethiopian. Later, I discovered that my Ethiopian name, Zaude, had been changed to the Israeli name of Sharon. I was pleased to have this name, because people explained to me that this was a new name from Jerusalem. Wonderful, I thought, but that led me to ask: Who am I, an Israeli or an Ethiopian? What does it mean to change your name to an Israeli one? Or on the contrary, to keep your Ethiopian name? Was society a factor that pulled me down and kept me back, or was it a motivating factor that pushed me forward? I

also asked, why am I different? Is difference a blessing or a handicap? Is this society racist or not? I had to reformulate my identity – how should I go about it? I was confused.

Furthermore, I constantly heard conflicting voices. Some said that Israeli society was racist, while others said it wasn't. Some said we had to throw our Ethiopian identity out the window, but some said we should preserve our traditions. I heard these two voices even within my own family.

One day I asked my grandfather, Abba Dejen Mengashe, of blessed memory, “Grandfather, how old are you?” He replied, “I’m eight years old.” I was astonished. “Eight years old? How can that be?” He answered that the moment he set foot on the ground of Jerusalem, he began to count the years of his life anew. I was thrilled. With all the complex reality of life after aliyah, my grandfather still saw the light of Jerusalem.

One day, my uncle (my grandfather's son) came to me and asked, "Do you think we have democracy in Israel?" "Of course we have democracy," I replied. He countered, "No! We have no democracy in Israel. The only place where there is democracy is in the cemetery." I asked him why he thought that. "While my father was alive, he lived in a small apartment in the immigrant absorption center, while the mayor of our city lived in a fancy neighborhood, in a large house. After my father's funeral, I saw who was buried next to him – the mayor! Finally they became neighbors." He continued, "You see, democracy exists only in the cemetery." I listened to both my grandfather and my uncle, and I asked, which one of them is right?

Shortly after this happened, my grandfather died. He was a man I esteemed greatly, who had a powerful fear of God. He was righteous and honest. He knew the book of Psalms by heart,

and he was a Jew with all his heart and might. He had a pure soul. I asked myself, where does he sit now – in the Garden of Eden? I thought that beyond any doubt, my grandfather must be sitting in the same room with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Aaron, David, and Solomon. He was sitting with all the tzaddikim, the Prophets, the Tannaim, and the Amoraim. Then I reached an earth-shattering conclusion: a man like my grandfather, whose worship of Heaven was based on the Ethiopian tradition, had reached the status of sitting up there with all the righteous people. For the first time, I understood that there were many channels to worshipping God, and all of them are equally legitimate.

Over time, I learned that everyone in the world has difficulties and challenges along the way. I tried to avoid asking questions like “Why did they do that to me?” “Why did God do that to me?” “Why is it my fault?” None of the immigrants to Israel have had it easy, no matter

what country they came from. Countless Jews suffered indescribable horrors in the death camps in Germany in the Second World War. Some were saved and came to Israel. But they weren't expecting government aid for new immigrants. They picked up weapons and went out to fight in the War of Independence, in order to establish a state. Many of them met their deaths. This had a big impression on me. People might call me naïve, but this quality is what has pushed me to examine the reality of Israeli society and discover that society is a given condition. Society does not make personal claims against certain individuals or groups. Each individual determines how to interpret society, whether in a positive or negative light. I, like my grandfather, have chosen to emphasize the good side of Israeli society, and I have found much to appreciate.

Today I have a PhD in Jewish philosophy from Bar-Ilan University, where I teach courses titled

“Culture, Halakhah, and Tradition in the Ethiopian Community” and “Tolerance and Pluralism in Jewish Sources.” I am also a lecturer at Tel Aviv University in the African Studies Department, where I teach “Ethiopian Jewry: From Ghetto to Segregation.” I also serve as rabbi of Kedoshei Yisrael, a community in Kiryat Gat that was established by Holocaust survivors. I am married to Avital, a highly educated woman (she has a degree in social work from Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a master’s degree in art therapy from Lesley University) who made aliyah from Switzerland as a young girl. We are parents to Roi, Nadav, Ziv, Gil, and Tohar. After over two thousand years of exile and wanderings, we are proud to live in Kiryat Gat in the Holy Land. It is truly a miracle, a miracle of the revival of the Jewish people, and a sign that the redemption will soon be coming.