Marching to the Beat of Their Own Drum: How Beta-Israel Uses Liturgical Music to Maintain its Roots Within a Foreign Culture

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Abstract— "Known as Falasha, Ethiopian Jews lived in isolation for centuries practicing an ancient, pre-talmudic form of Judaism, which traces its origins back to Solomon and Sheba." It was not until 1984 that this Falasha community, known as Beta-Israel, was covertly airlifted from Sudan during the civil war and brought to the State of Israel. Their arrival was accompanied by quite the culture shock for a variety of reasons, a significant one being religion. Much of the community quickly assimilated into modern society, leaving behind their traditional religious Ethiopian roots. As a result, the Beta-Israel community became a minority, a waning religious sect of Judaism in Israel. Yet, those who maintained their roots continued their practices with full vigor. Included in these practices is their unique liturgy, liturgical music and use of musical instruments in prayer. This paper will examine texts which discuss Ethiopian liturgical music in depth and explore what role this music plays in preserving their community.

Beta-Israel[1] traces their origins back to a union between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Yet, it was not until the 1800's that

[1] On a personal note, I had the privilege of attending a Beta-Israel synagogue service in Israel this past year on Passover. I was intrigued by their use of instruments, chants, marches and call and response prayers, all of which I did not understand as they were performed in their ancient Ge'ez. The use of instruments was especially surprising to me, as I had never witnessed instruments being played on a holiday in an orthodox congregation. However, given that Beta Israel is pre-talmudic, this prohibition was never enacted within their community, as it is Rabbinic in nature. Something else that stood out to me was the sparse synagogue attendance. Moreover, the majority of congregants were elders. There was only one teenager and one or two young adults.In thinking about their relatively small numbers, I was curious how adherence to their unique liturgical music plays a role in maintaining their community, and their cultural and religious roots."

world Jewry learned of Beta-Israel's existence, as the Ethiopian Jewish community remained disconnected from the rest of the Jewish world for hundreds of years.[2] Fast-forward to the 1970's, threatened by drought, famine and civil war, over 10,000 Ethiopian Jews fled Ethiopia by foot and "settled" in temporary camps in the Sudan.[3]

At first, the Israeli government followed a policy of gradually bringing Ethiopian Jews to Israel, but as the mortality rate rose in these camps due to deteriorating living conditions and disease, Israel abandoned this policy and adopted an aggressive approach. This culminated in the famous "Operation Moses" of November 1984, in which 6,700 Beta-Israel were airlifted from the Sudan to Israel.[4] Although the Sudanese government quietly cooperated with Israel, word got out of their operation, and Sudan halted emigration. Many Jews were left stranded in Sudan and Ethiopia.

Between 1985 and 1989, 648 Ethiopian Jews reached Israel through an effort known as "Operation Joshua," and 2,500 more through later small waves.[5] Amidst a bloody struggle for power within Sudan in 1991, concerned Israeli and American officials organized an airlift of over 14,000 more Ethiopian Jews in a mission coined "Operation Solomon."[6] Altogether, through these various aliyot (Hebrew for "moving to Israel"), almost 45,000 Beta-Israel, comprising over 90 percent of the current community, were able to seek refuge in Israel.[7]

Although Beta-Israel's miraculous arrival in Israel was cause for celebration, their cultural absorption journey had just begun. Prior to the aliyot, in 1973, the Israeli Ministry of Absorption issued a ruling which stated that Beta-Israel were not Jews, and therefore no action had to be taken to bring them to Israel. However, shortly after, the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rav Ovadia Yosef, and the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Shlomo Goren, officially recognized Beta-Israel's Jewishness, enabling them to return to Israel under the Law of Return.[8]

Still, there was tension regarding their religious practices which differed from the mainstream *halacha*. They were forced into absorption centers and required to adopt Hebrew names. From a secular and sociological perspective, they also experienced discrimination due to

[2] Arbel, Andrea S. Riding the Wave: The Jewish Agency's Role in the Mass Aliyah of Soviet and Ethiopian Jewry to Israel, 1987-1995. Jerusalem: Gefen, 2001.

[3] Kaplan, Steven, and Chaim Rosen. "Ethiopian Jews in Israel." The American Jewish Year Book 94 (1994): 59–109. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23605644.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Kaplan, Steven, and Chaim Rosen. "Ethiopian Jews in Israel." The American Jewish Year Book 94 (1994): 59–109. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23605644.

[7] Ibid.

[8] This law gives every Jew the legal right in Israel to move to Israel (Knesset.gov.il. Accessed December 22, 2021. https://www.knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/return.htm.)

their race and differing religious practices. They "combatted prejudice in finding housing and work, and coped with patronizing and condescending attitudes from their Jewish brethren."[9]

Facing so much pressure to assimilate into mainstream Israeli religious and secular culture, Beta-Israel had to make the critical decision of whether or not they would maintain the way of life they have known for thousands of years. Some scholars, such as Cantor Robbie Solomon and Rabbi Moshe Tembler, have expressed concern that any decision to abandon the prior way of life would lead to the extinction of their culture: "Just as Israel managed to obliterate the uniqueness of the Yemenite community over a period of years since their arrival in 1949-50, they are accomplishing the same assimilation with the Ethiopians."[10] However, Cantor Solomon argues that there is still hope for Beta-Israel to maintain its distinct culture through its liturgical music, as music "usually fares better against the pressures of assimilation."[11]

For Beta-Israel, their liturgical music is more than just a melody for prayer. Classified as zema (Ge'ez for music), Beta-Israel's liturgical music reflects Ethiopian Jews' entire approach to religious worship, complemented by the essential words of prayer. There are four main categories of zema, which also act as a form of musical mode: rajjim (high, tall, long), zeqqetaňňā (low, humble, inferior), aččir (short, brief, low), kaffetaňňā (high, lofty, important, requiring considerable skill).[12] The zema used depends on the prayer and the emotions which said prayer evokes. Zema includes ritual performance, melody, rhythm, instruments and dance.[13] The congregation prays through call and response chants. The chants are primarily led by the Kes, while lower level priests/assistants chant along in response, together with the congregants. The response is typically of an "archaic polyphony which appears by the encounter of several voices aiming to produce a one and only melody."[14]

As Roten Hervé observes, the chants may take various forms. The most common forms are the antiphonal and responsorial.[15] The

[9] Levi, Janice. "'Composing Identity: Transformative Collisions in Music and Culture.'" Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies 38, no. 2 (2015). https://doi.org/10.5070/f7382025968.

[10] Solomon, Robbie Solomon. "The Music of the Falashas." Cantors Assembly Journal of Synagogue Music XVIII, no. 1 (July 1988): 8–10.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Shelemay, Kay K. Music, Ritual, and Falasha History. East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State Univ. Pr., 1989.

[13] Ibid.

[14] "The Music of the Ethiopian Jews, the Beta Israel." Institut Européen des Musiques Juives, November 18, 2021. https://www.iemj.org/en/la-musique-des-juifs-dethiopie-les-beta-israel/. Excerpt of the book by Hervé Roten, Musiques liturgiques juives : parcours et escales, Coll. Musiques du monde, Cité de la Musique / Actes Sud, 1998, pp. 107-115

[15] Ibid.

antiphonal is comprised of a repetition of the Kes' melody, while the responsorial is responded to with a short phrase, such as "Amen" or "Alleluia" (Ge'ez for hallelujah).[16] There is also a third, more complex form of chant called the "hemiola type."[17] This "style comprises a tripartite division of each verse, with one side singing the beginning and end of the text and the second providing an intermediary phrase or response; the entire verse is then repeated with the second side singing first."[18] Its form can be seen through this diagram with each letter representing a distinct set of words and melody sung:

Soloist Choir Soloist	Choir	Soloist Choir
A B C	A	B C

Here, the soloist would be the Kes, and the choir would be either the congregation or the Kes' "priestly" assistants. Interestingly, any prayer can be performed in any of the chant forms. This will depend on the circumstances of prayer and the emotions the Kes is seeking to evoke. In more serious and solemn settings, the Kes will initiate the hemiola form to initiate a melodical reverberation of the prayers. Where prayers need to be speedy, the responsorial form will be used, as it requires only a brief affirmation. When the Kes wants to honor a person or mark an occasion, he will initiate the antiphonal chant to emphasize the significance of the text through repetition.[19] The chants are usually structured on the base of a pentatonic scale which is comprised of five notes per octave[20] and, sometimes, a tetratonic scale, which is composed of four notes per octave.[21] Both these are anhemitonic,[22] meaning that the scale does not contain semitones.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Shelemay, Kay K. Music, Ritual, and Falasha History. East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State Univ. Pr., 1989.

[19] "The Music of the Ethiopian Jews, the Beta Israel." Institut Européen des Musiques Juives, November 18, 2021. https://www.iemj.org/en/la-musique-des-juifs-dethiopie-les-beta-israel/. Excerpt of the book by Hervé Roten, Musiques liturgiques juives : parcours et escales, Coll. Musiques du monde, Cité de la Musique / Actes Sud, 1998, pp. 107-115

[20] "All about Pentatonic Scale." Simplifying Theory. Accessed December 22, 2021. https://www.simplifyingtheory.com/pentatonic-scale/.

[21] "The Music of the Ethiopian Jews, the Beta Israel." Institut Européen des Musiques Juives, November 18, 2021. https://www.iemj.org/en/la-musique-des-juifs-dethiopie-les-beta-israel/. Excerpt of the book by Hervé Roten, Musiques liturgiques juives : parcours et escales, Coll. Musiques du monde, Cité de la Musique / Actes Sud, 1998, pp. 107-115

[22] Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "pentatonic scale." Encyclopedia Britannica, February 21, 2014. https://www.britannica.com/art/pentatonic-scale.

To enhance the liturgical experience, the chants are often accompanied by a drum called a nagari (Ge'ez), and a metal, gong-style instrument, called a qacel (Ge'ez) both of which were played by the lower level priests in the Passover celebration in Kiryat Gat.[23] Banging of ritual canes against the ground, and foot-stomping may also be used to keep the beat of prayer, as was also done during that rite.[24] The nagari is played primarily on the 1, 3 and 4 beats, while the qacel is played on the 4.[25] These instruments are not used on the Sabbath or fast days, although they are permitted on religious holidays, such as Passover.[26]

Dance is yet another essential component of zema, dating back to the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites.[27] There are four official types of motions performed in prayer, of which the latter two are dances. They include bowing upon entry to the synagogue, jumping during the afternoon ritual, swaying by the priests during long prayers, and circle dancing with canes, raising and lowering them to the time of the music, and striking them against the ground.[28]

Inseparable from the music and dance are qalocc, the actual words of the prayer service. Just as the words are defined by the music, so is the music defined by the words. For Beta-Israel, zema and qalocc go hand in hand.[29] Together, they produce a certain effect that is unattainable from the solo performance of one or the other. For instance, Kay Shelemay, Professor of Music and Professor of African and African American Studies at Harvard University, reports that, "Priests were usually unable to speak texts during interview sessions, and those that were spoken deviated considerably from sung versions."[30] When asked about the importance of the zema-qalocc union, Beta-Israel Kes Gete Asrass answered, "When I just speak the words it has no meaning, but when I do the zema, then it will benefit you."

Roten Hervé's and Kay Shelemay's analysis of Beta-Israel liturgical music and performance practice have helped me to better understand the performance that I experienced, as well as others. A close listen and study of the afternoon prayer, Yətbārek… wanevāvo,[31] within these

[23] Shelemay, Kay K. Music, Ritual, and Falasha History. East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State Univ. Pr., 1989.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Shelemay, Kay K. Music, Ritual, and Falasha History. East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State Univ. Pr., 1989.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The Liturgy of Beta-Israel - Music of the Ethiopian Jewish Prayer. Jerusalem, Israel, n.d.,

guidelines, proves their observations ever-relevant.[32] Some of the phrases in this prayer are from Exodus and some Leviticus, including references to Yom Kippur. The prayer opens with a Kes chanting a short, unmeasured melody. When he finishes, the congregation repeats his exact chant, though quite polyphonically. This is an example of the antiphonal chant form described by Hervé. The Kes then initiates a faster, measured chant, which comprises the majority of the prayer. The chant very clearly follows the hemiola form, with a complex give and take between him and the congregation. Interestingly, many Kessim (plural of Kes) appear to be participating in this second part of the prayer, taking turns leading the hemiola. Because the way this plays out is not predetermined, there are points at which more than one Kes seems to be leading the chant simultaneously. This serves to enhance the multiplicity of the voices within the prayer, while focusing the leadership on the Kes, on behalf of the congregation. Within the second, dance-like, part of this prayer, the rhythm is relatively steady, fitting with Kelemay's observation of foot-stomping as a form of percussion.

The dancing may be attributed to creating a day of happiness and joy that they will experience when they are able to celebrate this day and other occasions on the streets of Jerusalem in the time of the Messiah.

Another prayer to which Shelemay's and Hervé's observations apply is 'ƎsebāhakaBakʷwelu gize, Zegevre 'aviya wamenkəra, Wə'ətus kəma mər`āwi, 'Amlākə `ālem, [33] a four part prayer performed at weddings. The first part of this prayer declares faithfulness to God and seeks His guidance. The second piece gives thanks for the ability to pray and chant at the celebratory event. The third section includes wedding blessings, a line from Psalm 19 relating to a groom[34], and blessings from Deuteronomy for procreation and land fertility. The final piece asks God to bless the worshippers and includes blessings for Jerusalem.[35]

Musically, these four pieces are unique and distinct. The first prayer is shorter, lasting for only a minute and a half. Like Yətbārek… wanevāvo, it too is antiphonal, and the congregation's response is quite

https://open.spotify.com/album/0iDT4YhCo8WphtMNvhAjAo?si=QBje4ydQTK2eeACUSXBwGA .

[32] "The Liturgy of Beta Israel: Music of the Ethiopian Jewish Prayer." The Liturgy of Beta Israel: Music of the Ethiopian Jewish Prayer | Jewish Music Research Centre. Accessed December 22, 2021. https://www.jewish-music.huji.ac.il/content/liturgy-beta-israel-music-ethiopian-jewish-prayer.

[33] The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The Liturgy of Beta-Israel - Music of the Ethiopian Jewish Prayer. Jerusalem, Israel, n.d., https://open.spotify.com/album/0iDT4YhCo8WphtMNvhAjAo?si=QBje4ydQTK2eeACUSXBwGA .

[34] Psalm 19:4, "who is like a groom coming forth from the chamber,

like a hero, eager to run his course." - https://www.sefaria.org/Psalms.19?lang=bi.

[35] "The Liturgy of Beta Israel: Music of the Ethiopian Jewish Prayer." The Liturgy of Beta Israel: Music of the Ethiopian Jewish Prayer | Jewish Music Research Centre. Accessed December 22, 2021. https://www.jewish-music.huji.ac.il/content/liturgy-beta-israel-music-ethiopian-jewish-prayer.

polyphonous. At the conclusion of the first section, there is a pause, and the second section then begins. The second piece is broken up into two parts. The first is a chant in a hemiola form, and the second is responsorial. The third piece is comprised of three parts: the first two are hemiola, and the third is antiphonal. From the start, the nagari and qacel are used to set a steady rhythm, but their use is discontinued in the second section of the third piece. Instead, the Kes keeps the beat by steadily stomping his foot. Altogether, this prayer incorporates a vast array of liturgical music, without the need for any external band to provide spiritual and emotional meaning and effect.

From the time of Solomon to present, Beta-Israel has undergone many physical, spiritual and sociological challenges. Due to the miracles of our time, their journey from ancient Israel to Ethiopia and Sudan has brought them back to the State of Israel. Resettlement has not been easy or simple. Their acceptance into Israeli society has been met with reluctance and discrimination in many areas, and assimilation has been the natural result of these challenges.

Yet, in the area of prayer and worship, many cling to their liturgical music roots, as well as to the practices of their ancestors. In doing so, they have managed to successfully maintain and take pride in their unique identity, religious observance, and ties to their homeland. Their words of prayer stem from the traditional biblical sources and their rites from a shared Israelite history. They have combined these words with vocal chants with their unique mix of responsive methodology, as well as instruments and dance. The symphony of prayer that emanates from Beta-Israel is one that defines the Ethiopian Jewish tradition and maintains a clear connection with a shared Jewish culture and land among all religious denominations.