

The Sigd Festival (Mahlele)

From the book from Sinai to Ethiopia Sharon Shalom

Ethiopian Halakhah

Source of the Festival

The biblical source for the Sigd¹ holiday is in the book of Nehemiah:

And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people – for he was above all the people – and when he opened it, all the people stood up. And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. And all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” with the lifting up of their hands; and they bowed their heads, and fell down before the Lord with their faces to the ground. (Nehemiah 8:5–6)

And they stood up in their place, and read in the book of the Law of the Lord their God a fourth of the day; and another fourth part they confessed, and prostrated themselves before the Lord their God. (Nehemiah 9:3)

Date

For many generations, this holiday was celebrated on 29 Heshvan, fifty days after Yom Kippur.²

The Sigd holiday connects between the individual’s spiritual self-accounting, which takes place on Yom Kippur, and the central disaster of the Jewish people – exile to the Diaspora, which took place due to the breakdown of proper interpersonal relations. The basic assumption is that in order to be deserving of

¹ The exact transliteration of the Ge’ez word is “Sgd,” but Western texts usually use “Sigd” for ease of pronunciation. The alternate name Mahelele is parallel to the Hebrew word *mehalelah*, “supplication,” derived from the Hebrew word Hallel, “praise” (of God).

² This is similar to Shavuot, which falls fifty days after Passover. Shoshanah Ben-Dor, *Ha-Sigd shel Beta Yisrael: Hag hidush ha-brit* (Hebrew University, 5745).

pilgrimage to Jerusalem, fasting on Yom Kippur and personal improvement are not enough. For seven weeks, the individual must count seven weeks during which the days are enlightened with the bright light of the individual repentance and atonement of Yom Kippur. On the fiftieth day, the circle of this counting is closed, and we must return to the experience of Yom Kippur, but this time as a collective that has undergone a reparative experience and heightening of moral, individual, and social awareness.

Meaning of the Holiday

This holiday has several meanings:

1. Sigd recalls the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai as the foundation of the covenant with God.
2. On this day, we commemorate the renewal of the covenant by the exiled Jews who returned to Jerusalem in the days of the Return to Zion.
3. Sigd serves as an opportunity to remind the Beta Israel, who are distant from the rest of the Jewish people, of the need to be faithful to the mitzvot, the Torah, and Jerusalem, despite the difficulty this may involve.
4. This holiday is an opportunity for the Beta Israel to recognize their repentance, to demonstrate their faithfulness to the covenant, and to address their heavenly Father through fasting and prayer.
5. Sigd leads to reconciliation between individuals. It creates a feeling of unity and security.

Preparations for Sigd

The day before Sigd, everyone, from children to the elderly, prepared with great anticipation for the next day. It was customary to prepare one's holiday clothes and launder them.³ The *kohanim* slaughtered cows and sheep and prepared the meat for a celebratory meal at the end of the Sigd holiday, and everyone gathered in the central villages, where the festival was held. In order to reach the villages on time, sometimes they had to travel long distances over several days.⁴ On the eve of the festival, it was customary to recite special prayers.

Location of Sigd

The Sigd celebration was always held on a high hill. Two reasons are given for this practice:

1. To reenact Moses' ascent to Mount Sinai on the day of the giving of the Torah.
2. A high place was considered sacred.

Before beginning prayers, the *kohanim* or elders of the community ascended the hill to the prayer site, in order to ascertain that everything was clean and pure, and to reinforce the fence that surrounded the site. They prepared a place for the Orit at the front part of the fence.

On the Day of Sigd

Early in the morning, the residents of the village and guests who had arrived went to the river to immerse themselves, and put on their clean holiday garments. Everyone

³ Similar to the preparations made by the Israelites for the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, which included laundering their clothes: "And the Lord said to Moses: 'Go to the people, and sanctify them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments'" (Exodus 19:10).

⁴ In ancient times, the pilgrimage to Jerusalem took a long time as well.

gathered together, and the *kohanim* took out the Orit and sang while the women emitted joyous sounds. Then they marched up the hill, carrying the Orit at the head of the procession. Some of the climbers carried stones on their backs or heads, to symbolize submission and surrender before God. When they reached the prayer site, the *kohanim* began the prayers for the day. Prayer was accompanied by hand movements.⁵

Below is the order of prayers:

1. Prayer for Jerusalem and the desire to bow down before God in Jerusalem.
2. The high priest enjoins the congregation to observe the laws of the Torah.
3. Reading from the Orit:
 - o The story of God's revelation on Mount Sinai.
 - o Reading from chapter 9 of the book of Nehemiah: renewal of the covenant between the people and God at the time of the Return to Zion.
 - o Reading the sections on blessings and curses – Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28–29.

The *kohanim* translated everything from Ge'ez to the spoken language – either Amharic or Tigrinya.

Toward the end, everyone asked for forgiveness for their sins. They went down on their knees and prostrated themselves on the ground while spreading their

⁵ Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael*, vol. 4, *Tefillat Moshe ve-inyan prisat ha-yadayim ba-tefillah* [Moses' prayer and the topic of spreading the hands during prayer], 71.

palms to Heaven. Then the shofar was blown, and they said, “Just as we have merited celebrating the holiday this year, so may we merit celebrating it next year in Jerusalem.” The day concludes with everyone descending the mountain in joy and dancing to the *tze/ot* building (house of prayer), where they hold a festive meal.

Excerpts from the prayer for Jerusalem:

Hallelujah, praise God	Rise up, Jerusalem
May your walls be rebuilt, Jerusalem	Gates of Jerusalem
We direct our prayer to You in Jerusalem	Roads of Jerusalem
Within the justice of Jerusalem	In the midst of Jerusalem
Lift the horn of Jerusalem	Return, Jerusalem
And pour out your blood around Jerusalem	Listen, Jerusalem. ⁶

Past and Present in Talmudic Halakhah

Some asserts that Sigd is a particular, local holiday that developed in Ethiopia, and that it was never known in any other Jewish community. But I would like to argue that in ancient times, Sigd was known among the entire Jewish people, and that due to historical circumstances, it was forgotten, while in Ethiopia it was preserved. A Talmudic source indicates the existence of this custom in the past throughout the Jewish world:

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said, By rights, the Eighth Day of Assembly (Shemini Atzeret) should have followed Sukkot after an interval of fifty days, as Shavuot follows Passover. But since at the Eighth Day of Assembly summer passes into autumn, the time is not suitable for traveling. To what may this be compared? A king had several married daughters, some living nearby,

⁶ Translation based on Eshkoli, *Sefer ha-Falashim*.

while others were a long way away. One day they all came to visit their father, the king. Said the king: "Those who are living nearby are able to travel at any time. But those who live at a distance are not able to travel at any time. So while they are all here with me, let us make one feast for all of them and rejoice with them." So with regard to Shavuot, which comes when winter is passing into summer, God says, "The season is fit for traveling." But the Eighth Day of Assembly comes when summer is passing into autumn, and the roads are dusty and hard for walking; hence it is not separated by an interval of fifty days. Said the Holy One, blessed be He: "These are not days for traveling; so while they are here, let us make of all of them one festival and rejoice." Therefore Moses admonishes Israel, saying to them, "On the eighth day you shall have a solemn assembly" (Numbers 29:35). Thus we may say, "How beautiful are your steps in sandals" (Song of Songs 7:2).⁷

This midrash indicates that the counting began from the first day of Sukkot, as opposed to the Ethiopian custom, which began from Yom Kippur. Still, I think it is strong evidence of the existence of this custom among the general Jewish community.⁸

The Recommended Custom in Israel

The Ethiopian Jews should continue to celebrate Sigd, which is an ancient holiday that may have been celebrated by the entire Jewish people. Further, the Jews living in their homeland today are very much in need of the messages and focus of the Sigd holiday in Ethiopia, which have eternal relevance: fraternal love, unity, and the formation of the covenant with the God of Israel and Jerusalem.

⁷ *Songs Rabbah* (Vilna ed.) 7:4, s.v. "another explanation."

⁸ I thank Rabbi Re'em Zafri for pointing out this *midrash* to me.