

# JAMS VIDEO PRESENTS

## SIGD HOLIDAY A COMMUNITY "SOUL RECKONING" DAY



### **SIGD HOLIDAY - A COMMUNITY "SOUL RECKONING" DAY (CHASBON NEFESH)**

During the years of exile, Ethiopian Jews suffered persecution and harassment because of their Judaism and were even sometimes pressured to convert to Christianity. Despite being apart from the rest of the Jewish communities, they fiercely observed Jewish mitzvot and customs and always retained the longing for Jerusalem. One of the customs of the community that has been preserved for generations is the Festival of Sigd.

#### **SOURCE**

The source for the Feast of Sigd is in the Book of Nehemiah (chapters 8-9), which describes a ceremony performed by Ezra and Nehemiah to renew the covenant between the people and God. On their return from the Babylonian exile, Ezra and Nehemiah found that the remnant of the community that had stayed in Jerusalem had strayed from the laws of Torah. Ezra reads aloud from the Torah before all the people to remind them of what they've lost, and they recommit to observing the commandments.

#### **BACKGROUND**

The word "Sigd" means to prostrate or bow down, and it symbolises trust and belief in God. The Festival of Sigd is celebrated fifty days after Yom Kippur, in which fasts are kept to ask for repentance for communal misdeeds. Whereas Yom Kippur focuses on personal repentance, Sigd is about the behaviour of the community. The customs of the holiday are reminiscent of some of the practices we read about at the time of receiving the Torah at Sinai and expresses the longing for Zion and Jerusalem. The social significance of the holiday serves as an opportunity to strengthen unity. Focusing on gathering, dialogue, connections between people, mutual assistance, and reconciling while jointly deciding on the community's agreed strategy towards current and long-term challenges.



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### HOLIDAY CUSTOMS

Traditionally the community would gather in designated villages on the morning of Sigd and climb on mass to a local high point or mountain. The climb is supposed to remind them of the climbing of Mount Sinai and they are led by their Kessim (spiritual leaders, equivalent to Rabbis) The Kessim carry their Torah scrolls, called Orit and the community follows, many carrying stones on their backs or their heads to symbolise their submission to God and their desire to ask forgiveness for sins.

When they reach the summit, the leading Kess would offer prayers for redemption and a return to Jerusalem and read from the Book of Orit selected passages that speak of the observance of the commandments.

After the prayer, the community descend the mountain with singing, music and dancing and gather to eat the holiday meal.

### SIGD HOLIDAY TODAY IN ISRAEL - MANNER AND INFLUENCE

With the fulfillment of the dream of returning to Zion (Land of Israel) and the immigration of members of the community to Israel, the Sigd celebrations now take place every year at a promontory overlooking Jerusalem or at the Western Wall. The members of the congregation

gather, offer prayers for keeping the covenant with God, and read passages from the book of Nehemiah and the Book of Leviticus that deal with covenantal renewal.

Over the years, the holiday has taken on a public tone, and many public figures attend the holiday ceremony. In 2008, the Israeli Parliament, Knesset enacted the "Sigd Holiday Law" - which establishes this holiday as an official holiday in the State of Israel.

Celebrating the holiday as an official holiday serves as an opportunity to glorify the holiday and feel a little of the longing of Ethiopian Jews for Jerusalem and the Land of Israel, and to recognize the deep meaning of their immigration to Israel. But more than that, the celebration of the holiday today allows Israel to stop and gather, out of mutual respect and partnership. The holiday is now an opportunity for the Jewish community as a whole to also consider how we want to repent as a collective and what actions we want to prioritise to creating a better society for all.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Have you known or heard of the Sigd holiday before?
- What do you think are the main messages and values of the Sigd holiday that emerged from this JAMS video?
- Is there a particular element of the Sigd holiday that you would like to adopt for yourself as an individual or as a community?
- The story of Ethiopian Jewry is not yet widely known, why do you think that is?
- Do you think this is a relevant holiday for our time and why?
- Why is getting to know the story of the Ethiopian Jewish community important?
- What is the place of Ethiopian Jewry in the general story of the people of Israel?