

Journey From a “Small Place” to a “Big Place”: Mediated and Divided Sanctity in a Pilgrimage Holiday*

Rachel Sharaby

Ashkelon Academic College, Ashkelon, Israel

Sacred spaces have usually been presented dichotomously in pilgrimage studies: small or big, near or far, at the “center of the world” or at the margins. This article discusses a unique combined pilgrimage during the Seged holiday of the Jews of Ethiopia, which is still celebrated today. Based on testimonies, I conclude that they made a physical and symbolic journey from the “small place” to the “big place”. The “big place”, similarly to the sacredness itself, was also divided into two memory places. The liturgy of the Seged mediated between the “small place” and the “big place”. It also created a connection between the “small time” which includes the small everyday actions, and the “big time” which includes large leaps toward a mythological past.

Keywords: Seged, Ethiopia, sacred space, liturgy, ritual

A Sacred Place in the “Center of the World”

This article discusses an interesting and unique phenomenon of pilgrimage, in a religious-ethnic holiday called the “Seged”, which is still celebrated by the Jews in Ethiopia. This discussion may make a theoretical contribution to the broad literature on pilgrimage. The literature, as will be presented in brief, is divided on the question of the place of the pilgrimage site and some of its prominent characteristics. Mircea Eliade and Victor Turner are perceived as the “founding fathers”, and disagree on this issue. Eliade comes from a background of the science of religion and comparative religion, whereas Turner comes from a background of anthropology.

Eliade wrote that the space of the religious person is not homogenous, and he experiences disturbances and crises in it. The lack of homogeneity expresses the contrast between the sacred and the profane space (Eliade, 1959, p. 20). A sacred space represents a breakthrough of sanctity (hierophany) in the homogeneity of the space, in which there is Divine revelation (theophany) that turns it into a sacred space (Eliade, 1958, pp. 370-371).

According to Eliade, the sacred space symbolizes a “gate” which enables passage from one cosmic world to another: from Heaven to Earth and from the Earth to the Netherworld, which is the world of the dead. A connection is created between these three levels, via the sacred space, expressed in the expression axis mundi (the world axis), which is a cosmic pillar found at the center of the cosmos (Eliade, 1959, p. 21; Eliade & Sullivan, 1987, p. 166).

* **Acknowledgement:** I thank the African Studies Centre (ASCL), Leiden University, The Netherlands, for inviting me as a guest researcher which enabled me to work on this manuscript. I would also like to thank Dr. Amos Ron, head of the Department of Tourism, Ashkelon Academic College, for his enlightening comments, which greatly contributed to the article.

Funding acknowledgement: This research was supported by the Research Committee of Ashkelon Academic College, Israel. Rachel Sharaby, Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Ashkelon Academic College, Ashkelon, Israel.

Eliade claimed that sacred spaces are the centers of the world (Eliade, 1958, p. 375). Thus, the religious person wants to be as close as possible to the center of the world. There, the "gate" is upwards, and ensures symbolic bursting from one level to another that enables the person a connection to the world beyond (Eliade, 1957, p. 202).

Eliade (2000, pp. 18-23) wrote that different cultures and religions attribute a place of honor to the symbolism of the "center". The temple that was built in the place where the center of the cosmos is found represents the essence of the cosmos. Temples are "Gates to Heaven", i.e., places of passage between Heaven and Earth, through which the world is sanctified and re-purified (Eliade, 1957, pp. 195, 209; 2005).

Eliade stressed that the hierophany that is repeated in the sacred space emphasizes the idea of the sacred time which serves as the basis for ritual systems (Eliade, 1996, p. 367). By the same line of thought with which he defined the religious space and the outburst of sanctity in it through a place, Eliade described the time of the religious person as time that is not homogenous and not continuous. On the one hand it is the profane time which has a regular, transient duration. On the other hand, this profane time contains intervals of sacred time, which is a time of holidays and rituals. The sacred time thus creates a break in the impure time and an outburst of the "big time". During rituals, there is passage from the profane time to the sacred time (Eliade, 1996, pp. 1-4, 388-408).

Eliade claimed that the old, profane time that includes remembrance of all archetypal events (i.e., history) is cyclically abolished, and mythical time is experienced (Eliade, 2000, p. 38). In his opinion, the main role of the myth is to determine the exemplary patterns of all spiritual and important human activities (Eliade, 1996, pp. 410, 429).

According to Eliade, mythological time has two characteristics: cyclicity and the fact that this sacred time has a "beginning" in history. The sacred time is reversible in the sense that the primordial mythical time becomes present. During festive ritual activity, man again experiences the primordial revelation which charges him with values and spiritual strength (Eliade, 1959; Gurevitz, 2007, p. 84).

Eliade claimed that any pilgrimage is a prototype of a sacred center, where time stops. Pilgrimage sites become "ritual spaces", where the boundary between Heaven and Earth blurs for the believer (Eliade, 1996, p. 367). He claimed that the road that leads to the center is difficult and wrought with dangers, because it is actually a rite of passage: from the profane to the sacred, from the transient and illusionary to the real and eternal, from death to life, from man to godliness.

Movement Toward the Sacred Periphery

The anthropologist Victor Turner regarded the three-dimensional ritual model coined by Van Gennep (1960), and in particular the "liminal period", as a suitable model for analyzing pilgrimage phenomena. In his opinion, pilgrimage is a universal religious behavior that includes three stages that characterize a rite of passage: parting from the community of origin and the way to the sacred space; staying in the sacred space in a "liminal" existence; returning home and reconnecting with society (Limor & Reiner, 2005, pp. 5-6). According to Turner (1974; 2005, pp. 38-41), pilgrimage is a clear example of a liminal existence on the margins of geographical and social frameworks. Places of pilgrimage, in different religions, are usually found outside the administrative centers of the state or the church.

Turner was influenced by the idea of a sacred space as suggested by Eliade, but did not accept the emphasis on the center in his doctrine. In other words, Turner stressed the journey, the movement to and from,

whereas Eliade stressed the target, which is the center. Turner claimed that the pilgrim leaves his home and his familiar world, and goes on a journey that involves dangers, to a distant sacred place, "a center out there", which then becomes a temporary center for him (Feldman, 2005, p. 90; Turner, 1973; V. Turner & E. Turner, 1978, pp. 34-35).

Turner found similarity between the transformation undergone by the pilgrim and liminal rites: initiation rites and rites of affliction, which were discussed by Van Gennep (1960). Turner claimed that similarly to those participating in these rites, the movement of the pilgrim from a profane center to a sacred periphery enables him to distance himself from everyday life, to a place where he can mortify himself, atone for his sins, be liberated from distress, and return at a high spiritual level (Limor, 2014, p. 41; V. Turner & E. Turner, 1978, pp. 33-35). According to Turner, pilgrimage as a liminal phenomenon exists outside the family, community, and state frameworks, and their laws do not apply to it. It involves leaving the common social space for the anti-structure that liberates the person from social bonds and enables him to achieve another level of understanding (Turner, 1979, p. 41).

Turner claimed that the pilgrimage transfers the participant to a different type of time. He is no longer subject to the structural, historical, and social time framework that directs the social process in his rural or urban home community. Rather, he returns, kinetically, to time fragments that have become sacred. Turner described the liminal ritual time as charismatic, different, as a sacred reality in which the sacred objects, which are charged with symbolism and a higher reality, are presented and basic religious stories are repeated dramatically (Ben-Dor, 1985a, pp. 97-99; Turner, 1974; 2005, p. 49).

Pilgrimage studies have branched out over the years, and some have abandoned the universal approach that characterized the founding generation. Their followers sometimes took a more focused point of view. The academic ascription has branched out, and today a significant part of the research is performed by geographers, sociologists, economists, etc. Many researchers are even identified with focused research of specific pilgrimage sites, such as the studies of Michael De Giovine on Padre Pio in Italy (Di Giovane, 2012a; 2012b; 2012c; 2015; 2020 in press) or Simon Coleman on Walsingham in England (Coleman, 2014).

Only few researchers employed both classical research perceptions and current ones at the same time. A good example for this is John Eade, who worked and wrote and criticized the founding generation and was a pioneer in developing innovative and current methods in pilgrimage studies. This breakthrough was expressed, *inter alia*, in the studies on Lourdes in France, which spread over decades (Eade, 1992, 2020 in press). Some of his studies were written and published together with Simon Coleman and others (Mesaritou, Coleman, & Eade, 2016).

Journey in the Wake of the Text

The anthropologists Eade and Sallnow criticized Eliade's viewpoint that every pilgrimage site is a prototype of a sacred center, which is distinct from the profane space, and claimed that sanctity may develop in different ways. In their opinion, the Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem was not always a journey to defined places, but rather mainly a journey following a text (Eade & Sallnow, 1991; 2000; Sallnow, 1981). Eade and Sallnow led a pioneering theoretical discussion that may be relevant to the present article. They concluded that crusader sites around Jerusalem can be replaced, without losing their sanctity, if the same text is applied to new sites. In their opinion, it can even be claimed that the sacred sites of Jerusalem do not radiate any strength, and serve for illustrating the text (Eade & Sallnow, 2005, p. 71).

Eade and Sallnow also disagreed with Eliade’s traditional viewpoint, according to which the power of the pilgrimage site stems from within, and its contents are to a great extent predetermined. They concluded that pilgrimage sites have their own internal religious importance. However, they concomitantly comprise a ritual arena for expressing perceptions and meanings that the pilgrims themselves bring with them (Eade & Sallnow, 2005, pp. 69-72).

The Research Goals

The sacred spaces were usually presented in a dichotomous manner in the scientific literature that discusses pilgrimage: small (for example, a temple) or big (a city, such as Jerusalem or Mecca or the Land of Israel), near-local or far, located at the “center of the cosmos” or on the margins, with immanent sanctity or intended to illustrate the text. The focused studies that are so common today usually deal in Christianity, and as a result, other religions are “neglected”. The present study that discusses a pilgrimage that takes place today in Judaism is important for research since it focuses on Judaism and on the African continent, which have not been investigated enough to date.

This article takes a look at pilgrimage in a religious-ethnic holiday, the “Seged” of Ethiopian Jews, and examines a unique combined phenomenon that has not been researched to date. I shall begin with presenting Zali Gurevitch’s concepts of place and time: “small place” and “big place” in a discussion on the Land of Israel, in a context not related to pilgrimage (Gurevitch, 2007, pp. 8-10; Gurevitch & Aran, 1991, pp. 9-11). He wrote that a “small place” is close in meaning to the concept of nativity: city, house, neighborhood. In contradistinction, a “big place” is not a particular site, but rather the idea itself, for example the collective identity.

Under Eliade’s influence (Eliade, 2005, p. 429), Gurevitch also formulated a distinction between two time perceptions (Gurevitch, 2007, pp. 82-84; Gurevitch & Aran, 1991, p. 11). “Small time” refers to measured steps of “small” daily repetitions, such as the morning ritual and the daily routine, as opposed to the “big time” of broad leaps that deviate from the everyday and jump to the past, such as the cyclicity of holidays and place rituals. This is time that returns historically or mythically-archetypically to the past.

In this article I adopt Gurevitch’s conceptualization of place, but test it from a broader perspective. I claim that pilgrimage in the unique case of the Seged was to a local, not necessarily sacred, “small place” in the Diaspora. It served as a temporary space for the Ethiopian Jews, a substitute for the sacred, national yearned-for “big place” in the Land of Israel. Thus, in my viewpoint, the pilgrimage site of the Seged was a mean for pilgrimage to the Land of Israel, and therefore had “mediated sanctity”. Since the Jews of Ethiopia prayed for Jerusalem and Mount Sinai during the Seged, I claim that the “big place”, like the sanctity itself, was divided between two sacred places.

I also claim that the liturgy of the “small place” in the Seged is what connected it to the “big place” and created a historic time leap between the present and the myths of the past in the history of the Jewish people. This enabled the pilgrim in the Seged to go on an endless, eternal journey which could generate a change in him.

The point of view and the impressions of participants in the Seged will therefore comprise an important measure for testing the main issues in this article. For example, the characteristics of the places chosen for pilgrimage in the Seged, the manner in which the Jews of Ethiopia perceived the pilgrimage and the significance of the events that took place at its sites, their perceptions regarding the time frame of the Seged and

the manner in which the texts on the mountain connected between a near and far space, past, present, and even future.

Methodology

I used a phenomenological-hermeneutical approach for achieving the study's aims. This method attributes importance to understanding, describing, and analyzing a social phenomenon (in this case pilgrimage during the Seged) via the participants' subjective experience (Chase, 2005). The phenomenological-hermeneutical approach claims that people differ in their definition of reality. It is therefore important for the researcher to clarify their viewpoints and perceptions regarding the significance of the studied phenomenon (Van Maanen, 2011, pp. 1-12).

The hermeneutical method is particularly essential for analyzing the complex meaning of a ritual, such as the one held during the Seged, since a ritual is a dramatic pattern that may contain both conflictual and integrative processes. Careful interpretation of past insights for roles, for the hidden rules and for its hidden meanings, is therefore necessary. According to Geertz (1990, p. 30), when analyzing a ritual, the investigator examines society as a text whose different levels he interprets: level of people's internal interpretation (emic concept) and level of the observing researcher's interpretation (etic concept).

The research instrument suitable for achieving this goal is a semi-structured in-depth interview that may supply information and focus reference on the issue chosen by the investigator (Shkedi, 2003, p. 23). However, the researcher also affords the interviewee an opportunity to express himself and develop topics in directions not foreseen by the investigator. The semi-structured in-depth interviews in this study supplied information and insights on the unique phenomenon of pilgrimage during the Seged in Ethiopia. The study included 40 interviews with Jews from Ethiopia that were held intermittently between 2012 and 2017. I should indicate that most of the Ethiopian Jews immigrated to Israel in the two large mass immigrations: in 1984-1985 (Operation Moses) and in 1990-1991 (Operation Solomon).

Diverse demographic data were chosen, in order to avoid research bias. Eighteen women and 22 men were interviewed. Of these, 10 are old religious priests (kessoch) who led their communities in Ethiopia. Young kessoch who were trained in Ethiopia and were appointed to their position in Israel were also included. I met these leaders within the framework of a journey of interviews which I undertook with a colleague during 2009-2011, in settlements of Ethiopian immigrants in Israel. Most of the interviewees live in these settlements, mainly in periphery areas. The interviews were held in a synagogue or in the interviewee's home, and when necessary, younger family members assisted with translation.

The ages of the interviewees ranged from 38 to 83. Some of them immigrated to Israel during the first immigration wave in 1984 and some during the second wave in 1991. The interviewees came from different communities in Ethiopia, and experienced the Seged as children or as adults. I noticed the advantage of the older research population, in particular the kessoch, as an important source that may contribute to understanding the unique elements of the Seged as a community holiday in Ethiopia.

Using a method that reconstructs culture via interviews, in particular interviews of older people, has drawbacks which are characteristic of research into life stories in general (Atzmon, 2001, p. 137; Bertoux, 1981). Older people tend to forget and idealize the past. Nonetheless, these sources, which comprise an “oral history”, are an important social and cultural text, as in the investigated phenomenon, where written sources are scarce.

Origin and Significance of the Seged Holiday

Seged, in Amharic, means prostration. The holiday is also called Mehlella, which means supplication in Ge'ez (Abbink, 1983, p. 791). The Seged is celebrated by the Jews in Ethiopia on November 29, i.e., 50 days after the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), which is a day of self-scrutiny in Judaism.

This date has unique significance which indicates its conceptual affinity to Yom Kippur. The basic assumption is that in order to be worthy of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, it is not enough to fast on Yom Kippur, i.e., personal atonement. Rather, 50 days of repentance should be observed. On the 50th day, the Yom Kippur experience must be repeated, but this time as a collective that underwent a corrective experience and an increase in the personal and social spiritual tension (Shalom, 2012, p. 209). Kess Webshit Ainbram said, for example: “We celebrate 50 days after Yom Kippur so that Yom Kippur will be remembered. That the repentance and the promise which each person made on that day will be remembered, each person needs to self-scrutiny again”.

The tradition of the Ethiopian Jews claims that the origin of the holiday is the pilgrimage of the Jews during the “Return to Zion” (Shivat Zion) period, headed by their leaders Ezra and Nehemiah. During this period, the Jews returned from their exile in Babylon to the Land of Israel, in 538 BCE, following the Decree of Cyrus, King of Persia. The Ethiopian Jews explain the existence of the Seged holiday as a reconstruction of the covenant between God and the People of Israel in Jerusalem during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, who convened the people during this event and read the Torah to them and the people repented (Shalom, 2012, p. 209).

There is evidence for the observance of the Seged holiday in the 15th century. However, in the absence of a written tradition, it is difficult to determine when exactly the people began to celebrate it. It is assumed that the holiday was set as a response to religious and existential crises in the history of Beta Israel, which endangered their physical and spiritual existence, i.e., intermarriage and conversion. The Jews of Ethiopia thus adopted the act of Ezra and Nehemiah as an example, with the aim of strengthening their faith (Ben-Dor, 1985a, pp. 67-72).

A historical perception, which indicates the continuity of the tradition of Ezra and Nehemiah by the Jews of Ethiopia, and its important role in preserving their religious identity, was voiced in the talks with their spiritual leaders. Kess Mula Salmon said, for example: “The origin of the Seged is after the destruction of the First Temple. The people were exiled and began to assimilate among the gentiles. God was then revealed to Ezra and told him to gather the nation and return them to God and to the righteous path, and our ancestors continued the tradition from there”.

The interviewees indicated additional religious and social meanings of the Seged holiday. For them, the Seged is reminiscent of the covenant between God and the People of Israel during the Revelation at Sinai. The Seged serves as an opportunity to remind the Jews of Ethiopia of the need to be faithful to the commandments of the Torah and to Jerusalem. Other interviewees stressed the social aspect of the Seged and its crucial function for social solidarity.

Connection Between a Small and a Big Place

The Jews of Ethiopia made pilgrimages to sacred spaces that were distant from their settlements, and were sanctified due to miracles or bravery of saints, at set dates during the year (Ben-Dor, 1985b). They remained in

these places as individuals or as communities for several days and occupied themselves with spiritual activity. During the Seged which lasted one day, only some of the Jews of Ethiopia, who wanted inspiration from the lives of the saints and to imitate their actions, made the pilgrimage to the sacred spaces (Abbink, 1983, p. 791).

Pilgrimage to sacred sites is a known religious and social phenomenon in different religions (Maraval, 2005; Turner, 1979). It was also a major component of the lives and identities of Jewish communities, mainly in North Africa (Bilu, 2005). However, the perception of the site on the Seged holiday is a unique case.

Most places where the Seged was celebrated were not connected to sacred stories. The Jews of Ethiopia usually preferred a pilgrimage to mountains that were not initially sacred, but were near their villages. Thus, contrary to Turner who claimed that pilgrimage exists on the margins of geographical and social borders (V. Turner & E. Turner, 1978, pp. 25-34), the Ethiopian Jews preferred their pilgrimage to a place in the center. This custom is indeed compatible with the model presented by Eliade (1991), but contrary to him, the pilgrimage site for the Seged was not necessarily sacred.

The uniqueness of the pilgrimage site of the Seged is in that it was located symbolically between the margins and the center, and actually bridged over the theoretical perceptions formulated by Eliade and Turner. According to Turner, distancing themselves to a marginal place is important, so that the pilgrims will suffer self-denial during the tribulations of the way and will atone for their sins (Turner, 1975, pp. 193-197). This goal was achieved in the Seged also by those who left their village and went to another, distant village. Most of the Ethiopian Jews went to a place near their village, bordering their village, which is not part of the customary religious system. It may therefore be said that this near periphery achieved some of the goals of the periphery referred to by Turner (Ben-Dor, 1985a, p. 88).

Climbing the mountain in the Seged was perceived by the Jews of Ethiopia as important because the mountain is a pure space, intended to temporarily replace the pilgrimage to Jerusalem during the times of the Temple. It was believed that the prayer of a person found in a pure state in a pure space will be accepted. Climbing the mountain was also perceived as an act reminiscent of Moses ascending Mount Sinai when receiving the Torah (Ben-Dor, 1985a, pp. 33-35).

The tradition of pilgrimage to a sacred space during the Seged was not always preserved in Ethiopia. When necessary, the holiday was moved to a new, not necessarily sacred, place (Ben-Dor, 1985a, p. 86). This phenomenon is familiar in the scientific literature and indicates the weight of different factors in shaping a tradition of pilgrimage (Limor, 2005, p. 256). Furthermore, a sacred space, whether its sanctity originates in heroics or miracles or whether in the religious ritual in the Seged, is perceived as less sacred than the sacred space in Jerusalem.

Thus, the place of pilgrimage in the Seged did not usually have its own immanent sanctity. Rather, it served as a mean for pilgrimage to a sacred space in the Land of Israel. Kess Zamana Sahalo said, for example: "The Seged is the time to confess to God for sins, like in the times of Ezra and Nehemiah. We continued this tradition exactly as our forefathers did. In the Seged we climbed a high mountain, which symbolizes the Revelation at Sinai, and there we stood and read the Torah". Askabab Zarihu recalled: "For me, the holiday was a time to pray to God to help us immigrate to the Land of Israel, a holiday of prayer and yearnings for Israel and Jerusalem, a special holiday where everyone is together".

These and other testimonies strengthened my insight on the suitability of Gurevitch's conceptualization of "small place" and "big place" to the patterns of the Seged holiday (Gurevitch, 2007, pp. 8-10; Gurevitch & Aran, 1991, pp. 9-11). I claim that the Jews of Ethiopia held a physical and a symbolic journey during the

Seged, from a temporary, local, diasporic, near, accessible, and not necessarily sacred “small place” to a sacred, national, distant, yearned-for “big place”. In my opinion, the pilgrimage site in the Seged had “mediated sanctity”. Furthermore, the “big place”, like the sanctity itself, was also divided between two sacred spaces: Jerusalem and Mount Sinai. These are places of an outburst of sanctity (theophany), of Divine revelation, according to Eliade (2000, p. 11). They serve as a stage for the historic drama that is at the foundations of the religion, and are testimony to the verity of the tradition related to them.

I claim that the liturgy in the “small place” in the Seged is what caused its encounter with the “big place” and created a simultaneous leap in historic time between the present and the myths of the past in Jewish history. In this manner, the pilgrimage journey of the Seged did not end with the realization of the pilgrims to reach the physical space, but rather crossed continents, both symbolically and virtually.

The Course of the Ritual

Every ritual is a planned event, accompanied by the use of symbols, which Turner called the main or dominant symbols, since they are eternal and represent the cultural model (V. Turner & E. Turner, 1978, pp. 60, 243-246). Turner also claimed that the influence of symbolic objects is stronger during a pilgrimage, when they are taken out of their routine framework into the new framework (V. Turner & E. Turner, 1978, p. 11). It is therefore reasonable to assume that symbols which are familiar to the Ethiopian Jews in their everyday life and were transcribed to the ritual framework of the Seged, had greater influence on the commitment to the values represented by the symbols. The testimonies indicate that the spiritual leaders of the community were the main symbol in the ritual system of the Seged during routine life. They also used other symbols and conducted all stages of the ritual (see also Ben-Dor, 1985a, pp. 95-97).

The Seged holiday, as a liminal phenomenon of pilgrimage, included major components that parallel the stages of a rite of passage, according to Turner’s model (Turner, 1967), as will be described henceforth.

First Stage—Journey to the Sacred Space

The preparations. Walking to a place that is distant from everyday life, the tribulations of the way and the psychological distancing appear to be expressions that parallel the separation stage in Turner’s theoretical model of rites of passage. This stage began with preparations for the Seged holiday.

Much activity was apparent in the entire area as the date of the Seged neared, near the mountain chosen by the kessoch as the place of convergence for the holiday (Abbink, 1983, pp. 792-793). People from different villages went with their leaders, the kessoch, on a journey to the central village where the Seged was celebrated. They left distant villages for a journey on foot that lasted several days. The interviewees indicated the strong passion that caused them to leave their homes and villages, begin their journey, and turn the pilgrimage into an experiential time devoted entirely to the supreme cause. Marhat Malkam, from the village of Wuzaba in the Gondar region, said: “We came, members of the community, from far away, from different villages, to a high mountain, with lots of excitement. We walked for several days to reach the Seged holiday. We felt elation and sanctity”.

The preparations in the hosting village were also accompanied by great excitement, as described by Esther Tazazo: “The holiday was very family-oriented. Waiting for uncles who came from afar, accompanied by cousins I had not seen for a year or more, was nerve-wracking, and the presents we received from our relatives were more precious to me than gold”.

These testimonies and others show that the hospitality, which comprised a main value in the culture of the Ethiopian Jews, fulfilled a major role in the preparations for the holiday. The preparations also reflected the community and family solidarity (Salamon, 2008, p. 122) as well as the traditional gender role division. Adiso Mamo told: "There were many preparations for the holiday. I would go to the market to buy new clothes for myself and for my family. We would also prepare for visits of the guests who came from afar, but each had his role: the wife mainly at home cleaning, cooking. Everyone helped in preparing for the holiday".

The interviewees stressed the active participation of the children in the preparations. Abraham Akala told of his experiences: "As a child I would help my mother arrange and clean before the arrival of the guests and take care of the sheep and cattle. This was the most meaningful experience for me". The descriptions indicate that the adults wanted to imbue the holiday tradition to the younger generation, as told, for example, by Isaac Nagat: "As a child I remember mainly my grandfather telling me every year, time after time, what is the Seged and why we celebrate it".

The preparations for the Seged included purification, which the Ethiopian Jews were strict to observe (Shalom, 2012, p. 210). All members of the community prepared and laundered their white holiday clothes, similarly to the preparations made for the Revelation at Sinai. The act of purification thus created a symbolic connection to the Revelation at Sinai. Members of the community kept themselves in a pure state for seven days prior to the Seged, by sexual abstinence and avoiding physical contact with non-Jews (Abbink, 1983, p. 793). I should indicate that sexual abstinence was also common in pilgrimages of other religions, as an act of purification (Maraval, 2005, p. 161).

According to the testimonies, kessoch, together with other members of the community, went up the mountain a day or two prior to the holiday, in order to ensure that the place was free of impurity. They strengthened the stone wall that surrounded their place of prayer and decorated it with colorful cloths. On the front side of the wall, which delineated the place where the kessoch would stand, they prepared a small stone altar for the Torah scroll.

On the day prior to the Seged, the kessoch slaughtered bulls donated by wealthy members of the community, according to Jewish dietary laws (shechita). The men prepared the meat for the shared meal at the end of the holiday (Shalom, 2012, p. 210). The collective activity reflected the central place of the community and the value of mutual responsibility among the Ethiopian Jews.

Climbing the mountain. On the morning of Seged, all villagers and their guests immersed in the river and put on white holiday clothes. They also fasted, similarly to the acts of repentance of the people during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. I should indicate that fasting as an act of self-mortification and repentance also appeared in pilgrimages of other religions (Maraval, 2005, p. 161).

A large gathering gathered in the synagogue square from the early morning hours. The kessoch took out the Torah scrolls singing, and the women made sounds of happiness. The blowing of metal horns announced the ascension up the mountain, and symbolized the beginning of the sacred holiday. The interviewees described the splendid sight of the climbing up the mountain: a long and convoluted line of people in a slow procession, singing, where the white dress can be seen from afar.

The order in which the community walked up the mountain reflected the social structure in everyday life in the community. The old and important kessoch headed the procession. They were clothed in a dark felt gown (kabba) and wore a traditional white hat (shach) on their heads. These were followed by apprentice kessoch (debteras), after them the kessoch's helpers (deacons) who carried the Torah scrolls on their head, wrapped in

leather bags and colorful cloths, under a colorful umbrella that indicated the high rank of the kessoch. After them marched the elders of the community, then the men, and lastly the women and children.

Garmadai Nagosa told: “I remember that as a child, my father would obligate me to get up with him early in the morning. I would put on my new clothes and join the men, since I was already obligated to fast like the adults. We would climb a high mountain near our village in the Tigray region, with the kessoch leading. My mother and sisters climbed the mountain with the women, behind us”. Mavrat Tasema recalled: “One could see the entire family, neighbors and relatives, all climbing the mountain. The procession was headed by the kessoch, followed by the men, and only then the women. We would not stand together, men and women. Everyone was dressed in their nicest clothes”.

According to the testimonies, all celebrators carried a stone on their back or head while climbing the mountain. The stone symbolized their submission to God on the day of the Seged, and their request of God to have mercy on them and fulfill their wishes. The stone thus serves as an expression for feelings related to the day’s atmosphere, similarly to the repentance event during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah.

When the celebrators reached the mountaintop, they placed the stone on the circular stone fence that indicated the “sacred place” that delineated the place of prayer of the kessoch, and where the Uric book was placed (Abbink, 1983, p. 793). The fence thus served as a physical and symbolic boundary that illustrates the representation, order, and social control in the hands of the elite (see also Lefebvre, 1991). The kessoch’s fence served as a symbol for people during the entire year, so that they would honor the sacred space.

The stone was a main motif in the descriptions of the interviewees, and expressed the deep religious meaning attributed to the Seged as a day of repentance. Reuben Waba said: “I remember that we carried stones on our heads or on our backs. The stone symbolized a surrender to God. The significance of the stone on the head was that God is guarding and protecting us and we surrender to Him. On the mountaintop we placed the stones on the fence”.

Second Stage—The Ritual Activity on the Mountain

During this stage, a public prayer was held on the mountain, which seemingly parallels Turner’s second stage, of staying in a liminal space disengaged from everyday life. Analysis of a public ritual such as the public prayer of the Seged enables us to examine the roles it plays for members of a religious community, and comprises an opportunity to learn about the manner in which they present their interpretations of the tradition via performance of practices (Libel, 2004, p. 11).

On the mountain, the kessoch took up their place in the purified area, and placed the Torah scrolls on the designated stone alter. Kess Sahalo explained that the order in which the kessoch stood in this area was important: in the first row stood the important kessoch, and in the row behind them the apprentice kessoch. The public also gathered around them according to a hierarchic order: the men and the adults in the front, behind them the young men, and the women around them, without any partitions.

The ritual on the mountain included prayers and begging for mercy, forgiveness, and redemption from God, reading sections from the Torah and other texts. The priests prayed for hours. Each prayer was said in its unique melody, and the congregation answered with Amen and bowed from time to time. The women mostly spread their palms toward the sky, as a sign of supplication. Similarly to any ritual action, the ritual in the Seged is composed of several main units which I will briefly describe (see also Abbink, 1983, pp. 794-795; Ben-Dor, 1985a, pp. 42-55).

1. The kessoch opened with the morning prayers of the Seged. Their main motifs were praise for God, asking for mercy and forgiveness and expression of yearning to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Temple.

2. Reading sections of the Torah that describe the repentance of the people during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, which served as an example to the Jews of Ethiopia for renewing the covenant with God and for ending the exile.

3. Reading in the Torah about the Revelation at Sinai and reception of the Ten Commandments, which were intended to remind the people gathered for the Seged of the obligation to uphold the laws of the Torah.

4. The priests read chapters from the Torah that stressed the blessings for people who observe the commandments, and the curses for those who do not.

5. The priests held fixed prayers for the afternoon hours, whose content is praise of God and asking for forgiveness.

6. The senior kess gave a sermon to the congregation, and preached about the importance of upholding the laws of the Torah. He ended with a blessing for the welfare of the Jews of Ethiopia and the Jewish People, and wished the celebrators that they will celebrate the Seged in Jerusalem in the coming year.

The interviewees indicated the extent to which the contents of the prayers and their peak moments left a great impression on them and strengthened their faith. They regarded the sacred public event as a good time for personal requests, and a recurring motif in their sayings was the yearning to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Malki Tamate, from the village of Wugamba in the Gondar region, recalled: “The entire community would listen to the prayer, prostrate themselves on the ground and ask for mercy from God. There was a feeling of purity, of sacredness, a feeling that the Gates of Heaven are opening and the prayer is accepted, and that next year we will indeed reach Jerusalem. After the prayer they said ‘that we will not die before we see Jerusalem’”. This interview, and others, also reflect the social solidarity to which the Jewish community, as a minority group, attributed great importance.

There were also more spontaneous parts, alongside the official ritual on the mountain. In most places in Ethiopia they customarily upheld a custom called “Amen” for mentioning the names of deceased. The praying people also placed wheat seeds (taf) on the stones, for the birds, while saying the names of deceased relatives. As clarified by Ababa Mabart: “We would spread taf seeds and mention the names of the deceased. What each of them did during their lives is told, the birds eat the seeds, and this means that the prayers for the deceased will reach Heaven”.

When the prayers were done, the people would place sums of money on the stone fence that delineated the place where the kessoch stood. The money was payment for a vow that the praying person vowed, or a donation to the kessoch. The kessoch divided the money among themselves at the end of the day and used it for the needs of their communities.

The liturgy: Connection between “small time” and “big time”. The liturgy, i.e., the ritual system that took place in public in the sacred space, whose essence is prayer, was the declared goal of going to this place (Limor, 2014, p. 38). In monotheistic religions, prayer in sacred spaces is perceived as more valuable than prayer in other places, where the sacred space has a direct connection to Heaven (Eliade, 1957, pp. 195-202).

The liturgy in the sacred spaces emphasized their significance as witnesses who perpetuate the events that took place in them, and can be viewed as “reconstructing liturgy” (Limor, 1998, p. 11). The Holy Land, and especially Jerusalem, had a special status because of their direct connection to the story underlying the belief. Thus, story, ritual, time, and place were united (Smith, 1987, pp. 86, 89, 92).

Similarly, the liturgy during the Seged was directed to revive a starting point in Jewish history, and to renew the connection of the Ethiopian Jews with Divine values. The descriptions also support Eliade's perception of the sacred time, which has the reversible trait of infinite return to the moment of revelation in Genesis, which charged humankind with values and spiritual strength (Eliade, 1959). Nonetheless, I conclude that the liturgy in the Seged did not necessarily take place in a sacred space. Rather, it was intended to reconstruct the drama of past events in Jerusalem and during the Revelation at Sinai, i.e., the time of the beginning of the People, in a distant sacred space.

The participants in the Seged were aware that they are repeating acts related to these sacred places in the ritual activity on the mountain. The kessoch told exemplary stories of the “national myth”, from the most sacred symbol, the Torah scroll, which represented the Revelation at Sinai and the gathering of the People in Jerusalem by Ezra and Nehemiah (Ben-Dor, 1985a, pp. 101, 117). The descriptions support Eliade and Sallnow's (2005, p. 71) claim that pilgrimage is a journey in the footsteps of a text. However, while they described physical journeys of pilgrims accompanied by texts, I gained the impression that most of the Seged journey was not physical, but rather symbolic, via the text.

Following the testimonies, I adopt the distinction made by Gurevitch (Gurevitch, 2007, pp. 82-84; Gurevitch & Aran, 1991, p. 11) between two time perceptions, as influenced by Eliade (2005, p. 429). However, I suggest an additional theoretical level that enables connecting between them. I claim that in the Seged, the liturgy created a connection between the “small time” which are small measured steps of everyday life, and the “big time” which are large steps that deviate from everyday life and leap toward the historical-mythical.

Furthermore, from the celebrators I learn that in the sacred time created on the mountain, they made a historic leap not only backward to places of the historic, mythological time, but also forward, to the future, to redemption and immigration to the Land of Israel and Jerusalem. I compare this to Eliade's yearning for Paradise, i.e., for the person's desire to always be in a sacred space (Eliade, 1996, pp. 1-4; 2000, pp. 46-47).

Third Stage—The Descent From the Mountain and the Festive Meal

The journey back, the outburst of joy after descending from the mountain, and the meal, appear to parallel the third stage of Turner's model, the stage of reunification of those participating in the ritual with society.

When the kess finished his sermon, a metal horn was sounded, and this symbolized the passage from the sacred to the profane and a turn in the holiday: The atmosphere of prayer, silence, seriousness, and mourning was replaced at once with a sense of great happiness, relief, and purification from sins. The kessoch and their helpers descended the mountain with the celebrators, singing, in the order in which they ascended. Kess Baruch Sandaka told: “The atmosphere on the mountain was sacred. We prayed that we would reach Jerusalem. Everyone listened very quietly, with respect, with veneration, even the small children. We descended the mountain singing and dancing and with a feeling of internal purification”.

When they reached the village, the mass of celebrators walked around the synagogue with the Torah scrolls. Afterwards, they accompanied the return of the Torah scrolls to the Holy Ark in the synagogue while singing, blowing on horns, and dancing. Putting the Torah scrolls back symbolized the end of the fasting and the beginning of the festive shared holiday meal that took place near the synagogue in the afternoon hours. Again, the origin of this custom is from the story of Ezra and Nehemiah, who instructed the People to eat, drink, and be merry, because God is on their side.

The testimonies indicate that the order in which the kessoch sat reflected cultural norms such as honor and hierarchy, and was determined by status, age, and gender (Poluda, 2007). The kessoch sat at the head of the table, according to the order of their status. These were followed by the older men and then the younger men, the women, and the children. The women served the traditional dishes, and the shared meal continued until nearly sunset, with singing, playing instruments, and dancing.

Zayat Tasama told of her experiences: “Near the synagogue we would cut the dabu (traditional thick bread), after making a blessing. There were many kinds of dips. All of us women would serve the men, and would also pour tela (an alcoholic beverage)”. Jacob Aniyahu recalled: “We would descend the mountain after finishing the praying, bless the bread and hold a large meal. First the adults ate, and we waited patiently to be served as well. There was much respect for adults. This is how we were educated. Also obedience to our parents”.

The described ritual eating practices reflected the cultural values: respect, mutual help and hospitality. The eating culture during the Seged meal enabled exchange of information and strengthening of the mutual intra- and extra-community relations, similarly to other social events in the community (Koiler, 2014, p. 122).

After the meal, each family gathered in its home with its guests. The kessoch used this opportunity to discuss issues common to their communities. Such acts of cooperation expressed the principle of mutual help and responsibility in the Jewish communities of Ethiopia (Abbink, 1983, p. 795).

Conclusions

The Seged is a pilgrimage holiday that is still celebrated by the Jews of Ethiopia today, on 29 November. This is a day of fasting, purification, and prayer that took place in high places, during which the religious priests read sections from the Torah and held prayers for redemption and for a return to the Land of Israel. The Seged reconstructed and symbolized the renewed covenant between the People of Israel and God during the period of Ezra and Nehemiah in Jerusalem and the Revelation at Sinai. This is in order to strengthen the religious beliefs of the Ethiopian Jews and their yearning to reach Israel. The Seged also strengthened the intra- and extra-community social solidarity and helped consolidate the identity of the Ethiopian Jews as an ethnic minority group within the framework of a multi-ethnic society.

The findings show that the schedule of the Seged, similarly to any ritual activity, was fixed, accompanied by symbols, and evoked a strong impression among the participants. The Seged, as a liminal phenomenon of pilgrimage, included major components that parallel the stages of Turner’s (1967) rite of passage model. The first stage—disengagement: the preparations and the journey to the place of pilgrimage. The second stage—the liminal: the ritual activity on the mountain. The third stage—reunification: the return journey and the meal.

Pilgrimage is a social religious phenomenon common to many religions. The fascinating aspect of this phenomenon is that in spite of the large religious, geographical, and cultural distances, its main characteristics are very similar. However, from the findings I conclude that perception of the place of pilgrimage on the Seged holiday in Ethiopia is a unique case. Socio-anthropological theories that discussed pilgrimage usually presented the sacred spaces dichotomously: small or big, near-local or far, located at the “center of the world” or at the margin, with immanent sanctity or intended to illustrate the text. This article, which discusses a pilgrimage among the Jews of Ethiopia in the Seged holiday, examines a combined phenomenon.

The place of pilgrimage in the Seged did not usually have any inherent sanctity. Rather, it served as a mean for pilgrimage to the sacred space in the Land of Israel. In the Seged, the Jews of Ethiopia actually held a

physical and symbolic journey from a temporary, local, diasporic, not necessarily sacred "small place" to a sacred, national, distant, yearned-for "big place". Therefore, in my opinion, the place of pilgrimage in the Seged had "mediated sanctity". Furthermore, the "big place", like the sanctity itself, was split between two sacred spaces: Jerusalem and Mount Sinai. These are places of outburst of sanctity (theophany), of Divine revelation, according to Eliade (2000, p. 11).

The liturgy in the "small place" in the Seged is what in my opinion led to the meeting between it and the "big place". Concomitantly, it connected between the "small time" which are small measured steps of everyday life, and the "big time" which are large leaps toward a historic-mythological past. The celebrators even made a leap forward, to redemption in the Holy Land, similarly to the yearning for the Garden of Eden in Eliade's theory (Eliade, 1996, pp. 1-4, 388-408).

References

- Abbink, J. (1983). Seged celebration in Ethiopia and Israel: Continuity and change of a Falash religious celebration. *Anthropos*, 78, 789-810.
- Atzmon, Y. (2001). History of taking responsibility. In Y. Atzmon (Ed.), *Will you hear my voice?* (pp. 134-152). Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute (Hebrew).
- Ben-Dor, S. (1985a). *The Seged of Beta Israel*. Jerusalem: The Hebrew University (Hebrew).
- Ben-Dor, S. (1985b). The sacred places of the Jews of Ethiopia. *Peamim*, 32, 22-52 (Hebrew).
- Bertoux, D. (Ed.). (1981). *Biography and society*. London: Sage.
- Bilu, Y. (2005). *The Saints' impresarios*. Haifa: Haifa University (Hebrew).
- Chase, S. (2005). Narrative inquiry. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 651-679). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Coleman, S. (2014). Pilgrimage as trope for an anthropology of Christianity. *Current Anthropology*, 55(S10), S281-S291.
- Di Giovine, M. A. (2012a). A tale of two cities: Padre Pio and the reimagining of Pietrelcina and San Giovanni Rotondo. *Textus: English Studies in Italy*, 1(1), 155-167.
- Di Giovine, M. A. (2012b). Making Saints, (re-)making towns: Pilgrimage and devotion in the land of St. Padre Pio of Pietrelcina (Dissertation, University of Chicago, Chicago).
- Di Giovine, M. A. (2012c). Padre Pio for sale: Souvenirs, relics or identity markers? *International Journal of Tourism Anthropology*, 2(2), 108-127.
- Di Giovine, M. A. (2015). When popular religion becomes elite heritage: Tensions and transformations at the shrine of St. Padre Pio of Pietrelcina. In M. Robinson & H. Silverman (Eds.), *Encounters with popular pasts: Cultural heritage and popular culture* (pp. 31-47). New York: Springer.
- Di Giovine, M. A. (2020, in press). Galactic shrines and the Catholic Cult of St. Padre Pio of Pietrelcina. In J. S. Bielo & A. S. Ron (Eds.), *Landscapes of Christianity: Destination, temporality, transformation*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Eade, J. (1992). Pilgrimage and tourism at Lourdes, France. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 19(1), 18-32.
- Eade, J. (2020, in press). Domesticating the landscape: Water and the development of a pilgrimage shrine. In J. S. Bielo & A. S. Ron (Eds.), *Landscapes of Christianity: Destination, temporality, transformation*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Eade, J., & Sallnow, M. (1991). Introduction. In J. Eade & M. Sallnow (Eds.), *Contesting the sacred* (pp. 1-29). London: Routledge.
- Eade, J., & Sallnow, M. (2005). Introduction. In O. Limor & E. Reiner (Eds.), *Pilgrimage* (pp. 65-87). Raanana: The Open University (Hebrew).
- Eade, J., & Sallnow, M. (Eds.). (2000). *Contesting the sacred*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press.
- Eliade, M. (1957). Der Heilige Raum und Sakralisierung der Welt. In *Das Heilige und Heilige und das Profane: Vom Wesen des Religiösen* (pp. 13-39). Hamburg: Insel Verlag.
- Eliade, M. (1958). *Patterns in comparative religion*. London: Sheed and Ward.
- Eliade, M. (1959). *The sacred and the profane*. New York: Harcourt.
- Eliade, M. (1991). Symbolism of the center. In M. Eliade (Ed.), *Images of symbols* (pp. 27-56). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Eliade, M. (1996). *Patterns in comparative religion*. London: University of Nebraska Press.
- Eliade, M. (2000). *The myth of eternal return*. Jerusalem: Carmel (Hebrew).
- Eliade, M. (2005). The sacred space and the sanctity of the world. In O. Limor & E. Reiner (Eds.), *Pilgrimage* (pp. 193-211). Raanana: The Open University (Hebrew).
- Eliade, M., & Sullivan, L. (1987). Center of the world. In M. Eliade (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of religion* (Vol. 3, pp. 166-171). New York: Macmillan.
- Feldman, J. (2005). Experience of sharing and confirmation of authority. In O. Limor & E. Reiner (Eds.), *Pilgrimage* (pp. 88-109). Raanana: The Open University (Hebrew).
- Geertz, C. (1990). *Interpretation of cultures*. Jerusalem: Keter (Hebrew).
- Gurevitch, Z. (2007). *On the place*. Tel-Aviv: Am Oved (Hebrew).
- Gurevitch, Z., & Aran, G. (1991). On the place—local anthropology. *Alpaiim*, 4, 9-44 (Hebrew).
- Koiler, M. (2014). Food, honor and love. *Israelim*, 6, 95-122 (Hebrew).
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Libel, E. (2004). *Interpretations of tradition* (MA thesis, Ben-Gurion University, Beer-Sheva (Hebrew)).
- Limor, O. (1998). *Journeys of the holy land*. Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute (Hebrew).
- Limor, O. (2005). David's tomb on Mount Zion: On the origins of tradition. In O. Limor & E. Reiner (Eds.), *Pilgrimage* (pp. 256-267). Raanana: The Open University (Hebrew).
- Limor, O. (2014). A sacred place. In O. Limor & E. Reiner (Eds.), *Pilgrimage for Jews, Christians, Muslims* (pp. 15-42). Raanana: The Open University (Hebrew).
- Limor, O., & Reiner, E. (2005). Introduction. In O. Limor & E. Reiner (Eds.), *Pilgrimage* (pp. 5-15). Raanana: The Open University (Hebrew).
- Maraval, P. (2005). The time of the pilgrim. In O. Limor & E. Reiner (Eds.), *Pilgrimage* (pp. 159-167). Raanana: The Open University (Hebrew).
- Mesaritou, E., Coleman, S., & Eade, J. (2016). Introduction: Guiding the pilgrim. *Tourist Studies*, 16(1), 3-22.
- Poluda, E. (2007). *The world of girls and boys in rural and urban Ethiopia*. Addis Abeba: Forum for Social Studies.
- Salamon, H. (2008). The yearly cycle. In H. Salamon (Ed.), *Ethiopia* (pp. 119-126). Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute (Hebrew).
- Sallnow, M. (1981). *Communitas reconsidered: The sociology of Andean pilgrimage*. *Man*, 16, 163-182.
- Shalom, S. (2012). *From Sinai to Ethiopia*. Tel-Aviv: Yediot Aharonot (Hebrew).
- Shkedi, A. (2003). *Words that try to touch*. Tel-Aviv: Ramot (Hebrew).
- Smith, J. (1987). *To take place*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Turner, V. (1967). *The forest of symbols*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Turner, V. (1973). The center out there. *History of Religions*, 12, 191-230.
- Turner, V. (1974). *Dramas, fields and metaphors*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Turner, V. (1975). *Dramas, fields and metaphors*. London: Cornell University Press.
- Turner, V. (1979). *Process performance and pilgrimage*. New York: Concept Publishing.
- Turner, V. (2005). Pilgrimages as social processes. In O. Limor & E. Reiner (Eds.), *Pilgrimage* (pp. 19-63). Raanana: The Open University (Hebrew).
- Turner, V., & Turner, E. (1978). *Image and pilgrimage in Christian culture*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Van Gennep, A. (1960). *The rites of passage*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Van Maanen, J. (2011). *Tales from the field: On writing ethnography*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Weil, S. (2004). Ethiopian Jewish women: Trends and transformations in the context of transnational change. *Nashim*, 8, 73-86.
- Weil, S. (2013). I am a teacher and beautiful. In P. Morag Talmon and Y. Atzmon (Eds.), *Immigrant women in Israeli society* (pp. 186-206). Jerusalem: Bialik Institute (Hebrew).