

TEMESGEN

(THANKS TO GOD)

WORSHIP SONGS FROM ETHIOPIA'S BETA AVRAHAM JEWISH COMMUNITY



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Worship Songs of the Beta Avraham (“Kechene”) Jewish Community of Ethiopia

Background Information

By Lucy Y. Steinitz with information from Beta Avraham members Sintayehu Gezahegne and Demeke ben Engda

About three hundred years ago, a group of Jews left the Gonder area of Ethiopia to seek their fortunes in Ethiopia’s North Shewa area and later in Addis Ababa, where they settled in the Kechene neighborhood. Like their Gonder cousins who have since migrated in large numbers to Israel, this group consisted mostly of craftsmen, known especially for their beautiful hand-built pottery and woven cloth. But as the years passed, times became difficult and beginning in the 18th century, they experienced periods of extreme repression.

Eventually the community’s leaders felt that the only way to survive was to go underground – literally. Much like the Anusim of medieval Spain and Portugal, they practiced Christianity on the outside while secretly following Judaism in hidden synagogues, often in caves that are located hours away by foot from the nearest town. Fifteen of these secret synagogues still exist today, concentrated in the North Shewa area about 80 miles north of Addis Ababa. In the largest, called Mugar, about 300 men and women live permanently, their numbers swelling further at least twice a year when other community members join to commemorate their martyrs and celebrate their festivals. As with other Ethiopian Jews, their tradition consists only of pre-Talmudic practices.

The elders believe that the caves will take you to Yerushalayim (Jerusalem). Sintayehu said that he and Demeke once walked for 15 minutes inside the Mugar synagogue-cave and there was no end. Their torch, a candle, eventually burned out.

The traditional songs you hear in this album come from these secret synagogues, passed down from generation to generation.

Within the last few years a group of young men emerged from this community and, thanks to Ethiopia’s new constitution that guarantees freedom of worship, they decided to openly practice their religion once more. Much had been forgotten with regard to Jewish practice, but they opened a small synagogue in the Kechene neighborhood of Addis Ababa and learned anew. Although not yet recognized by the state of Israel as eligible for immigration under the Law of Return, in their songs they yearn for Jerusalem and for Israel - the land of their ancestors. Demeke and Sintayehu explain that this music, which the members sing after their regular Friday evening worship service, carries you spiritually to a different time and place. They are certainly right about that.

All the singers on this album remember their grandmothers and grandfathers singing these traditional songs in the secret synagogues. Demeke ben Engda, who moonlights as a professional singer and regularly leads the Friday evening Sabbath worship service in Kechene, has composed several modern songs in the traditional style. (Another synagogue member, Daniel Desalegn Firku, is a part-time collaborator.) Yet all members realize that, with increased exposure to the outside world, the danger lurks that all these songs may become irrevocably lost or changed. Hence the decision to make this CD -- the first of its kind. We are grateful to everyone who contributed.

For more information about the Ethiopian North Shewa Zionist Organization (i.e., the Beta Avraham Jewish Community of Kechene, Addis Ababa) see www.enszo.org and www.kulanu.org/ethiopia.

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SONG COMMENTARIES

Miseker (*Witness*). *Because our elders kept the tradition of our ancestors alive, even in secret, we have retained our Judaism through the generations. We bear witness to their dedication and are thankful.*

B'Yerusalem (*In Jerusalem*). *Jerusalem is our family's home; we wish to see it one day. It is where we come from and where we want to go. It is the city of our father Dawit (David) so we always dream of seeing it. Even though we live far away, God knows that we are part of Jerusalem.*

Min Alu Dawit (*What David Said*). *By doing good things, like respecting the Commandments, the community is following the words of King Dawit (David). By contrast, if someone falls away from the rules, the person should understand that this is wrong, apologize and change his or her ways. Then the person is welcome to return.*

Kiber New (*It is an Honor*). *Our Elders taught our fathers about our (Jewish) tradition. But much was kept secret (during Ethiopia's recent history) and not passed on to our own generation. We are asking our fathers to teach us more, because we hold the responsibility for the future. We regret what we don't know but we honor You, oh God.*

Senbet L'Yuna (*The Sabbath – Shabbat - is unique*). *The Sabbath is a unique and blessed day because we are obligated to rest. We thank God for Shabbat by singing and praising Him.*

Temesgen (*Thanks to God*). *We thank God, who is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who opened the waters so we could pass through (when escaping from slavery in Egypt). He promised Zion to us. He has kept us safe for thousands of years in Exile and He will see us through, until we return to the land of our forefathers.*

Zimare (*Song*). *Sing for love; Sing for peace; Sing for the Torah. Sing to honor God, who is the God of Israel and King of the World.*

Tesfaye (*My Hope*). *I will never give up because I know that you are my God and You are always with me. No matter what befalls me, I have hope. Even if I am not successful today, I know I will succeed in the future. Although others may denounce my faith, I will never give up because I believe in You.*

B'bete Mekdes (*Inside the Sanctuary*). *Thanks are offered with joy from inside the sanctuary. Our voices ring loud with praise to God. This song contains the holiest prayer for Jews, repeated here in Hebrew: 'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God the Lord is One.' In the Secret Synagogues, however, this prayer is said in Amharic.*

Tizazu Yemayishar (*His Holy Commandments*). *The Ten Commandments express our core principles and should be obeyed. Everyone who follows these commandments will be blessed. (Note: All ten commandments are sung sequentially.)*

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Traditional and modern Jewish songs in Amharic, including those that heretofore have been sung only in the community's "secret synagogues" during generations of their hidden existence.

<i>Miseker (Witness)</i>	<i>traditional</i>
<i>B'Yerusalem (In Jerusalem)</i>	<i>traditional</i>
<i>Min Alu Dawit (What David Said)</i>	<i>traditional</i>
<i>Kiber New (It Is an Honor)</i>	<i>modern/ Demeke</i>
<i>Senbet L'yuna (Sabbath is Unique)</i>	<i>traditional</i>
<i>Temesgen (Thanks to God)</i>	<i>modern/ Demeke & Daniel</i>
<i>Zimare (Song)</i>	<i>modern/ Demeke</i>
<i>Tesfaye (My Hope)</i>	<i>modern/ Demeke & Daniel</i>
<i>B'bete Mekdes (Inside the Sanctuary)</i>	<i>traditional</i>
<i>Tizazu Yemayishar (His Holy Commandments)</i>	<i>modern/ Demeke & Daniel</i>

*Modern songs are composed in the traditional style by Demeke ben Engda and Daniel Desalegn Firku
Singers are Demeke ben Engda (lead)
with Hilina Engida, Haile Eshete, Ababu Endale & Fisiha Getaneh
Arranged by Nebiyu Mulu Heada with Simagegneu Samuel Kefesho, instrumentalist.
Nebiyu Music Studio, Ethiopia; Lucy Y. Steinitz, Producer*

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For more information on the Beta Avraham ("Kechene") Community, see www.enszo.org*