YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The JOURNEY TO yARUSALEM**

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Translated by Kaeren Fish

# From my youth in Ethiopia, I was raised on “Yarusalem.” This was a word I heard constantly at home, in all types of situations – from the everyday conversations of my parents, to prayers, to every time of crisis. It was a magical word, illuminating and enlightening everyone, filing us with hope that one day this great dream would be realized. This word was a spiritual, heavenly, omnipotent word. It was akin to what the Talmud tells us of R. Akiva’s expression of encouragement to his wife in their own time of distress:

# “If only I could afford it,” said he to her, “I would present you with [the finest jewelry:] a Jerusalem of Gold.” (*Nedarim* 50a)

As I reached my teenage years, I heard Yarusalem coming tantalizingly closer. My parents told me, “We are travelling to Yarusalem.” They began to make preparations, but they warned us not to tell anyone — neither our non-Jewish neighbors, nor even the Jews who lived together with us. Everything had to be kept secret until the moment of departure.

At long last, our holiday arrived – the day of our departure for Jerusalem. Under cover of night, in silence, without anyone noticing, we covertly left for Jerusalem. As a child, I felt and thought that we would definitely reach Yarusalem very quickly, within a week, two weeks at most.

We set out on foot. Walking was not particular difficult, but the constant fear of being apprehended by the authorities (who, in those years, would not allow Jews to leave Ethiopia) was terrible and unremitting. The adults ordered us to walk quietly, to stop, not to go, to go — but always to be silent. There were times at which we would stay a whole day or night in one place, without moving, lest we be discovered.

I remember this journey as the path to realizing the greatest dream of all. Our steps were full of energy, as the name “Yarusalem” propelled us from within. With the anticipation of seeing the love of your life, you are filled with hope and physical strength that is never exhausted.

Nevertheless, from another point of view, this was an extremely difficult journey, physically, and mentally. Our anxieties and fears of never fulfilling our dream were real. There are scars that remain in your memory: the images of loved ones who can go no further, who stay there after a brief “ceremony” of parting, whom you know you will never see again — because they will be swallowed by the accursed ground or else they will sate the hunger of those predators in the desert. It is a feeling that is very difficult to bear.

Bit by bit, I matured on our way to Yarusalem. The thoughts I once had about reaching it in short order soon changed. We walk and we walk and we walk, but the journey never ends. It takes us more than three weeks until we arrive — not in Yarusalem, but in Sudan.

What I and my family experienced over the next three years in Sudan is difficult to describe briefly: the suffering, the hopelessness I felt there. Indeed, to describe it at length is also quite difficult! It was a foreign land, with a language, a culture and a religion that were unlike what we knew and understood. We focused on our desire to leave as quickly as possible, and we made no attempt to learn the local customs or to become acclimated; our faces were turned towards Yarusalem. This mental position made life even more difficult in this strange land, though our experience would have been challenging in any case.

Many – too many from our community – did not survive this journey. They never merited to see the Yarusalem we dreamed of, which we were raised on, for which we set out in the first place. However, the community itself, praised be the Creator, is now in Yarusalem, and several decades have passed.

It is specifically on the festival dedicated to celebrating Yarusalem that we recall those who fell along the way to the realization of our dream. The community remembers, the country remembers, and the People of Israel remember all who have fallen for the sake of Yarusalem.

May their memory be for a blessing, as we await the complete redemption, speedily in our days.

Yarusalem!

How many yearnings and longings I soaked up from my parents for you

How many living stories I heard about you; that you are beautiful, holy, pure.

That there is no poverty, hunger, or evil in you, but only good, wealth, joy and love.

That your streets are filled with:

Instead of dirt, gold.

Instead of defilement, purity.

Instead of hate, love.

Instead of evil, good.

Instead of worry, tranquility.

How much did I long for you, Eyarusalem?

I say a prayer for you, that you may be built speedily in our days.

Eyarusalem!

Oh, that I might merit to see you realize everything I soaked up from my parents for you.

**This is the story of my *aliya*, which I have described only briefly. I hope to write a book about it, so that the coming generations will know about it. Any contribution to help me reach the important goal of documenting my experience would be greatly appreciated.**

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