

**NACOEJ CURRICULUM**  
**ETHIOPIAN JEWS ARE PART OF THE WORLDWIDE**  
**JEWISH COMMUNITY**

**TOPIC 3: A JEWISH LIFE CYCLE EVENT\*:**  
**A BETA ISRAEL MARRIAGE CEREMONY**

This lesson focuses on a Jewish life cycle event: a Beta Israel marriage ceremony. It is designed in conjunction with other lessons in the NACOEJ curriculum. It may be used independently or in sequence with other lessons. Resources from other topics may enrich any single lesson. In addition to this full lesson, the teacher may choose to use the resource materials provided to expand learning related to broader Jewish practices.

**Life Cycle** – A full lesson is provided. The class can re-enact the Beta Israel community’s marriage ceremony and celebration as its own class activity, for an audience at a school event or in conjunction with a “simcha” or Jewish life cycle event being celebrated by the school or a family.

**Options for Expansion**

- 1. Holidays** – Resource material is provided for the teacher. During a holiday season, the teacher may want to have the children experience activities related to a Beta Israel Passover commemoration.
  
- 2. Religious rituals** – Resource material is provided for the teacher. Rituals could be introduced during a focus on prayer, kashrut, Torah study or Shabbat.

*Resource Information for Teachers:*

- A Jewish Life Cycle Event: Marriage Ceremony*
- Holidays, Festivals and Fasts of the Ethiopian Jews*
- Religious Practices of Ethiopian Jews*

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**TOPIC 3: A JEWISH LIFE CYCLE EVENT: SCENES FROM A  
BETA ISRAEL MARRIAGE CEREMONY\***

(Italicized items are available on the Resources and Materials page. list of links. Underlined words are defined in the lesson's Vocabulary page.)

**I. AIMS:**

- A. To promote awareness of the Jewish marriage practices of Ethiopian Jews that are similar to or different from those of modern Jewish marriage ceremonies and celebrations.
- B. To introduce students to examples of Jewish practices that are unique to the Jewish community in Ethiopia, the Beta Israel.
- C. To engage students in a re-enactment of an Ethiopian traditional wedding ceremony and celebration for a classroom lesson or presentation to an audience in school or at a school-sponsored fair.

**II. MATERIALS/RESOURCES:**

This list may be modified to accommodate activities chosen for the topic and the availability of the suggested items.

A. MATERIALS:

- 1. *Maps of Africa and Ethiopia*
- 2. Clothing: dress-up items for role-play
- 3. Food: injera or ingredients to make it. (Substitute possibilities such as pita, wrap)
- 4. Other items: walking sticks, recipes

**\*A video, on the Ethiopian Jewish marriage ceremony, "Jews in many Lands, The Falashas," is an integral part of this lesson. See page 3: "RESOURCES" for ordering information and cost.**

## B. PROPS FOR MARRIAGE CEREMONY SCENES:

1. Chairs with sheets suspended to suggest thatched roof of tukuls
2. Shamma; white shawls worn around shoulders
3. White turbans for Elders
4. Marriage contract: paper for three copies and pen (not in video)
5. Headband ribbon and narrower white and red cord or band
6. Branches (without limbs) for walking sticks and to pound on floor for rhythm
7. Gifts for the bride
8. Gong: a pot cover and stick
9. Drum: a small drum or plastic bucket and drumstick
10. Sticks for mock fire: a stack of pencils or a drawing or picture of a fire
11. Pot or pan for symbolic cooking
12. Basket for injera and for use in dance
13. Injera: pita or wrap

## C. RESOURCES

1. Video: “*Jews in Many Lands, The Falashas*”; Meyer Levin, (the marriage segment) VHS or DVD. Order from Ergo Media, Inc., PO Box 2037, Teaneck, NJ, 17666, \$19.95
2. DVD: *Beta Dance Troupe, Eskesta Shoulder Dancing of Ethiopian Jewry* (Donna Yates, Director of American Israeli Partnership for the Arts, 1-215 317- 0027)
3. *Teachers’ Informational Resource*
4. *Comparison: Wedding Practices Chart*

## III. MATERIALS FOR OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES

### A. *List of Jewish Values*

### B. *Journals/Chart/Pre-lesson Focus:*

My Journal: Journey Toward Tzedakah (teacher and student)  
Knowledge Chart

### C. Resource Information for Teachers:

1. *Holidays, Festivals and Fasts of the Ethiopian Jews*
2. *Religious Practices of Ethiopian Jews*

#### **IV. MOTIVATION: (5 minutes)**

(Should the teacher choose to have students use Journals and Knowledge Charts, briefly instruct students on how to use them.)

The teacher:

- A. WRITES on the board: The Jewish Life Cycle
- B. SAYS: Name three important events from the beginning to the end of one's life that are celebrated by the family and other members of the Jewish community.  
(Lists correct responses on the blackboard: birth, circumcision, Bar/Bat Mitzvah, marriage, death.)
- C. SAYS: Today we are going to see a video about the Jewish marriage ceremony of Ethiopian Jews, and we'll have fun enacting an Ethiopian marriage ceremony, learning to do the Beta Israel shoulder dance and hearing their music.

(Here, the teacher may want to show the students a map of Africa and ask a student to point to Ethiopia and locate Gondar, the northwestern province where Ethiopian Jews settled about 2,500 years ago and where many still live.

For the Jewish Ethiopian community, and Jewish communities all over the world, marriage is a life cycle event that unites members of its community. Such ceremonies and celebrations as weddings, childbirth and circumcision, or solemn occasions as funerals or tazkar (commemoration of the dead), unite all members of the community in special feasts and prayer services led by a Cahen or rabbi. Thus, the continuity of the Jewish people is ensured through such practices. Each marriage is the beginning of a new Jewish family and a new cycle of participating in a Jewish community's lifetime together.

## **V. PROCEDURE: A TRADITIONAL BETA ISRAEL MARRIAGE CEREMONY (45 minutes)**

- A. Students view the wedding segment of the video, *The Falashas*, (10 minutes) and view the DVD of the Ethiopian-Jewish shoulder dance and music (3 - 5 minutes).
- B. Students briefly practice the shoulder movements of the dance, turning their heads quickly from side-to-side while moving their shoulders up and down and taking short, quick jump steps.

### **C. A TRADITIONAL BETA ISRAEL MARRIAGE CEREMONY**

(inspired by the video)

#### **1. SET UPS:**

Students are given the script of five brief scenes. They help to arrange the room or stage into four areas: the bride's family tukel (hut), the groom's family tukul, the tukul for the newlyweds and the village community area in the center of the room or stage. The teacher can ready the room before the students arrive. If performed in a classroom, chairs could be moved out of the way and two or three could be used to symbolize each tukul.

Each student should be assigned an area and a role. The students form four groups in three corners and the center of the stage or room (as designated on their own script) which represent the huts or "tukuls" of the bride's family, the groom's family, the newlyweds' tukul. One group gathers in the center of the room or stage, which represents the village's communal center. The entire performance can be done using plastic drums as background accompaniment. The bride and groom and main characters can be identified by their white clothing and painted fingernails, and the Elders by their turbans.

- 2. **THE PLAYERS:** Students can play multiple roles as narrator, parents and wedding guests.
  - a. Narrator (s) describes scenes and provides explanations
  - b. Kes/Cahen
  - c. Groom (18 years old)
  - d. Groom's family: father, mother, brother (best man), sister (bridesmaid)
  - e. Elder
  - f. Bride (15 years old)
  - g. Bride's family: father, mother, sister
  - h. Drummers
  - i. Cooks
  - j. Dancers.
  - k. Members of the Jewish community

3. FIVE SCENES: Enacting a Beta Israel marriage ceremony and wedding celebration

NARRATOR: (Stands in the center of the village and addresses the audience.)

Among Ethiopian Jews, a wedding is the occasion for the whole Jewish community, called Beta Israel, to celebrate. Weeks before the date, everyone is excited about it. Marriages jointly arranged by the fathers of the bride and groom when the children were 9 to 13 years old. Two parties are held before the wedding—hosted, separately, by the bride's and groom's parents. Gifts are exchanged by the families: jewels to the bride's family, and cattle to the groom's family. The wedding starts outside the groom's family tukul.

Half of the cost for the wedding is paid by the bride's parents and half by the groom's parents. The language of the ceremony is Amharic, the national language of Ethiopians. Wedding guests dance to the rhythm of drums alone or later with a guitar. A lamb is killed and prepared for the feast. The bride's sister is her bridesmaid; the groom's best man is his brother. The groom wears a white shawl and, as part of the tying ceremony, a colorful red and white headband. In some villages, guns are fired as a sign of happiness. The bride and groom are given gifts of money to start their marriage. After the feast they enter their tukul and spend seven days alone together.

## **SCENE 1: Outside the Groom's Family Tukul**

NARRATOR:

The groom is outside his family tukul. He is getting ready to greet his bride. He is wearing a white shawl across his shoulders and is sitting in a chair facing the Cahen.

The groom's sister stands behind him with her hands on his chest.

GROOM'S SISTER:

From earth you came and to earth you will return. In man's heart is his tenderness and in his head is the wisdom that will make him a man.

NARRATOR:

The Cahen begins the Keserah, or "tying" ceremony: He holds, with two hands, one at each end, a colorful ribbon for a headband: first placing it flat over the groom's feet and legs as he sits in the chair, then over his thighs, then over his chest and finally he ties it on the groom's head, placing it in the middle of his forehead with the bow or knot in the back.

CAHEN:

God created man in his likeness. He took a rib from Adam and made woman. You walk on this earth. In your loins you have strength. There is tenderness in your heart and intelligence in your head.

NARRATOR:

The Elder places the headband on the groom's head and a narrower headband is tied on the forehead of the best man.

The groom is escorted by men toward the bride's house and honored by them with singing and pounding of sticks on the ground. Men and boys dance in place doing the Beta Israel Eskesta (shoulder dance) and taking small, short jumping steps. The groom's friends lead the groom to the bride's family tukul.

## **SCENE 2: At the Bride's Family Tukul: the Marriage Ceremony**

NARRATOR:

The Elder hits a gong (use a bucket or pot).

The groom sits outside the hut and young men perform a dance for him.

As the bride prepares to be led to the groom, the bride's sister puts a hand-woven white cotton shawl—a shamma—around the bride's shoulders.

The bride's sisters flank the bride and lead her from the tukul to sit next to the groom.

Members of the community sing and dance.

The Elder hits the gong. Men bang sticks on the ground in rhythm and everyone claps.

The bride and groom bow their heads to receive the blessing from the Kes.

KES:

Praise God. He created Eve to be Adam's wife. Be fruitful and multiply. Praise God.

NARRATOR:

The bride's parents bid farewell to their daughter.

Two males shoulder dance, standing still and facing each other, moving only their shoulders.

The bride and groom go together to the village center.

### **SCENE 3: Center of the Village: the Wedding Feast**

NARRATOR:

The Cahenet have slaughtered a lamb behind the bushes, close to where it will be prepared for the feast. All the villagers join the parade of people going to the wedding feast. The bride and groom sit in the center of the village, surrounded by their community.

Both the bride and groom wear white shawls called shamma. The bride wears hers over her head, and the groom wears his wrapped around his shoulders.

Among the wedding guests are Elders who wear white turbans. All the villagers hold sticks and baskets and dance in front of the couple. They put their hands first on their shoulders, then on their backs as they bend.

Sticks for the fire are placed under pots, and cooks prepare food in front of the seated couple.

A basket of flat rounded bread, called injera, (a traditional, spongy, pancake-like bread) is brought to the couple. Each breaks off a piece and, as a sign of affection, feeds it to each other as each opens his or her mouth to receive the injera. The remainder is shared as the basket is passed around to all the wedding guests, at the start of the wedding feast.

## **SCENE 4: At the Couple's New Tukul**

NARRATOR:

The whole community dances in front of the couple as the guests take them to their home, where the newlyweds can be alone.

The bride and groom walk together into their tukul. They wave good bye to the wedding guests.

All clap hands and wave.

After the wedding, the couple stays in their tukul, away from the community, for seven days to start their life together.

## **SCENE 5: One Week Later, in Front of the Groom's Family Tukul**

**NARRATOR:**

A week after the couple's separation from their families and community, they emerge from their tukul, happy, and walk to the groom's family tukul.

The groom's parents are sitting outside their home, awaiting the arrival of the newlyweds.

The couple bends over in front of the groom's father to receive his blessing. The groom's father stands and extends his hands toward them, pats their shoulders and blesses them:

**GROOM'S FATHER:**

May the God of Israel bless you and give you many children. Praise God!  
May you live to see the children of your children and their children. Praise God!  
May you see peace and prosperity in your home. Praise God!

**NARRATOR:**

The new couple enters the groom's family home.

## **VI. CONCLUDING ACTIVITY:**

### **COMPARISON OF JEWISH MARRIAGE PRACTICES: THE BETA ISRAEL AND THE STUDENTS' COMMUNITY**

There are Jewish communities around the world that have similar rites and practices in their life cycle events of birth, marriage and death. There are also many different practices among Jewish communities. It is remarkable that despite the Beta Israel community's separation from all other Jews in the world for 2,500 years, Ethiopian Jews still adhere to key Jewish birth and death rituals such as ritual purity, circumcision and seven days of mourning for the dead. Its marriage rituals bring the whole community together to celebrate the beginning of new Jewish couples' lifetimes together. As members of the Jewish community, they observe Jewish religious practices, fasts and holidays. The marriage life cycle event helps to ensure the preservation and continuity of the Jewish community.

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**A LIFE CYCLE EVENT: A BETA ISRAEL MARRIAGE  
CEREMONY AND CELEBRATION**

**COMPARISON: WEDDING PRACTICES CHART**

Instructions for students:

1. Examine the list and check, or fill in, the “Beta Israel” column to indicate their practices.
2. Place a check in the “Your Family’s or Community’s Practices” column to indicate familiar practices.
3. Use the “Comments” column to indicate similar and different practices.\*

WEDDING PRACTICES	BETA ISRAEL PRACTICES	YOUR FAMILY'S OR COMMUNITY'S PRACTICES	COMMENTS ON SIMILAR AND DIFFERENT PRACTICES
Age of bride & groom			
Alone together			
Animal slaughter			
Arranged marriage			
Best man			
Blessings			
Breaking of glass			
Bridesmaid			
Bride's clothing			
Bride & groom alone together			
Ceremony participants			
Chupa (canopy)			
Cosmetics for bride			
Gifts to couple			
Groom's clothing			
Groom going to bride			
Guests			
Ketuba/marriage contract			
Kes / rabbi			
Language of the ceremony			
Multiple days of celebration			
Music and dance			
Outdoors under sky			
Tying ceremony			
Veil			
Wedding feast			
Wedding ring			
Wine			

\* Students should understand that despite cultural differences, the marriage ceremony is a key life cycle event, preserving the continuity of the Jewish people. The teacher/students may select similar and different practices for discussion, exploring the diversity of the worldwide Jewish community. Discussions may involve differing marriage customs such as breaking a glass to remember the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, or reasons for cultural differences, such as the Beta Israel isolation from the worldwide Jewish community for centuries.

## **VII. OPTIONS FOR CLASSROOM/HOMEWORK**

A. **JEWISH VALUES:** The teacher and students may suggest appropriate Jewish values for the lesson. See *List of Jewish Values*.

### **SUGGESTIONS:**

1. “Shalom Bayit” (“Peace in the home”)
2. “Klal” (“Be part of a community”)

### **B. HOMEWORK:**

1. Note the similar marriage practices with which you and your family are familiar. Talk to your parents about what you learned about Ethiopian marriage practices and ask them if there are other similarities between Ethiopian Jewish marriage practices and those of your family’s origins.
2. Add those practices to your list and share them with your teacher and classmates.
3. Explain: Why do you agree or disagree that a life cycle event such as marriage is important for the future of Jewish communities around the world?

### **C. STUDENT WRITING ASSIGNMENT:**

1. a story
2. a poem
3. a report

## **VIII. CURRICULUM PROJECT FEEDBACK FORM:**

### **TOPIC 3: A BETA ISRAEL MARRIAGE CEREMONY**

Please see the *Feedback Form* and forward it to: [curriculum@nacoiej.org](mailto:curriculum@nacoiej.org)

## **IX. VOCABULARY : TOPIC 3: THE JEWISH LIFE CYCLE: A BETA ISRAEL MARRIAGE CEREMONY**

<b>Amharic:</b>	a primarily Semitic language that is the official language of Ethiopia.
<b>Beta Israel:</b>	the name of the Jewish community in Ethiopia
<b>Cahen/Cahenet:</b>	singular and plural form; a family's or village's chief religious official; community leaders; synonymous with a "Kes"
<b>Eskesta:</b>	a Beta Israel shoulder dance
<b>henna:</b>	reddish-brown dye obtained from leaves of the henna plant
<b>injera:</b>	spongy pancake-like bread made from tef, a nutritious grain
<b>Keshera:</b>	Beta Israel wedding's "tying" ceremony
<b>Kes:</b>	spiritual leader of Beta Israel equivalent to a rabbi; similar to a Cohen in the Temple
<b>shamma:</b>	hand-woven white cloth worn around the shoulders as a shawl over clothing
<b>tukul:</b>	an Ethiopian round hut, with a thatched roof

## **X. BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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