

## *Hazkarah* (a day of memory), a symbolic day for the refoundation of the Jewish-Ethiopian *edah*\*

Emanuela Trevisan Semi

In this paper I would like to present a few reflections starting with the fact that the appropriated place for the *hazkarah* ceremony of the Ethiopian Jews was only institutionalised in September 2003. In the absence of an appropriated place for the Ethiopian *edah*<sup>1</sup> in Israeli society, the ceremony has been transformed into a metaphor for the representation of the marginalized feelings of the *edah*. This paper deals with the request from the Ethiopian *edah* for the inclusion in the national narrative of a place of memory for 4000 Ethiopian Jews. I would like to demonstrate how this day has become a day for the symbolic refoundation of the *edah*. This is a day that demonstrates the internalisation, on the part of Jews from Ethiopia, of the model of a national celebration. It has brought them to the point of transforming a day of individual and collective mourning into a demonstration of adherence to standardized feelings of belonging to the Israeli people.

For the identity construction of the Jewish Ethiopian community, the production of public representation of identity, much in the same way as the creation of a place of memory, has become an extremely meaningful event. Between 1977 and 1985 approximately 20 000 Jews from Ethiopia left their homes to come to Jerusalem but a fifth of them (4 000 people) perished during the journey<sup>2</sup>. The negation of the possibility of constructing a shared memory, based on a founding event such as the exodus from Ethiopia, concretised in a well-identified place, has become a source of conflict within the *edah* itself and Israeli society.

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- 1 I use the controversial term of *edah* because it was used by the same Ethiopian students I interviewed without starting any polemic discussion; in fact, it was used with a sense of pride.
- 2 Most of them died of starvation or cholera on the refugee camps in Sudan, see Tudor Parfitt, *Operation Moses: The Story of the Exodus of the Falasha Jews from Ethiopia*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985; Gadi Ben Ezer has described narratives of trauma lived through by Ethiopian Jews cfr. "Trauma and Trauma signals in the Narratives of the Migration Journey of Ethiopian Jews to Israel", Thompson, P et.al. (eds.), *Trauma and memory*, London: Routledge Press, 1998.

Abbink, analysing the celebration of another ceremony of the Jews of Ethiopia, the *segd*, has already pointed out the problems tied to the choice of a place that the Ethiopian *edah* considered appropriate.

In his important paper “Seged celebration in Ethiopia and Israel: continuity and change of a Falasha Religious Holiday”<sup>3</sup> Abbink analysed the introduction of *segd*, a holiday celebrated only by Ethiopian Jews, in Israeli public space and the transformation that took place with the holding of this holiday.

The introduction of *segd* in Israel was not simple. The first attempt (1980) did not succeed: first because Haifa was chosen as the place for this event (it was judged as inappropriate place) second not all the Ethiopians shared in the choice to reintroduce a celebration that was not very “Jewish” but so markedly Ethiopian. Two years later, Haifa was substituted by Mount Zion in Jerusalem and since the organisation has had much more success. Abbink writes that the celebration of *segd* in Israel can be considered a type of “dramatization of the *aliyyah*-crisis”<sup>4</sup> in that it mixed religious themes with political claims and languages of exile with Hebrew. He concluded by affirming that such a celebration “was ‘recreated’ in the image of the Israeli ‘civil religion’”<sup>5</sup> specifically to show the necessity for Ethiopian Jews to affirm their own identity. Since Abbink carried out his research, the celebration of *segd* has become increasingly transformed into a day of celebration of Ethiopian identity assimilable with *Mimuna* (an important celebration for Moroccan identity), rather than being a new Israeli civil religious holiday.

*Segd*, from a holiday that marked the Jewishness of Ethiopians in Ethiopia, became a holiday that marks the “Ethiopia-ness” of Jews in Israel. It continues to represent a path of continuity in the ethnicisation of the *edah* while *hazkarah*, which commemorates the Jewish Ethiopians who perished during the journey that was under taken to reach Israel (during the so-called “Moshe operation” in 1984), is starting to take on the form of a new Israeli civil religious holiday, in which a collective memory of identification is constructed. It demands to be registered in the national narrative. This day, which is in the process of Israelisation, has several names in Hebrew: *hazkharah le-yehude Etiopia she naflu be-darkam arzah, yom zikkaron, yom le-hazkharat ha-nispim*, or *hazkharat mivzah Moshe*. The uncertainty of the terminology is evidence of an identity that is still confused or undergoing definition.

*Hazkharah* was celebrated by Jews from Ethiopia for the first time in Jerusalem in 1986<sup>6</sup> and has become increasingly ritualised throughout the years. The symbology that characterises the time and space of this commemoration is highly revealing. The chosen place is a locality near Kibbutz Ramat Rahel, situated south of

3 *Anthropos*, 78, no 5-6 (1983), pp. 789-810.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 806.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 801.

6 This is the date according to my informants. Shalva Weil disagrees with this date and is sure she took part to the 1985 ceremony.

Jerusalem and the chosen day is *Yom Yerushalaim* which falls on the 28th of *Iyyar*. This date commemorates the taking of Jerusalem, during the Six-Day War, as well as the fallen on that occasion. Jerusalem, or better Zion, is the place towards which the Jews from Ethiopia started to walk after abandoning Ethiopia. The choice of this day indicates a desire to identify with the Israelis who perished for Jerusalem, as well as the desire to affirm a feeling of belonging to the same national narrative and memory<sup>7</sup>. The place, kibbutz Ramat Rahel, commemorates the place in which, according to tradition, Rahel was buried. Rahel was one of the biblical matriarchs; “the mother who cries for her children” (Jer.31, 15) in the Jewish tradition. In this way the Ethiopian *edah* is inserted into the genealogical memory of Israeli society and is perceived as less “foreign” with respect to the latter. A place marked as the burial place of one of the ancestors of the Jewish people and a kibbutz, symbol of Israeliness: these were excellent founding elements for the symbolic construction of a new Ethiopian-Israeli identity.

### The celebration of *hazkharah*

As had already occurred during the founding of the *segd* holiday, many debates and conflicts arose between Jews from Ethiopia and between the associations which represented them throughout the eighteen years of the existence of this commemorative day.

Criticisms were aimed at the precariousness of the place: poorly equipped and situated on steep terrain with little shade from the sun, and the lack of a commemorative monument, the *andarta*<sup>8</sup>. This had always been promised by politicians in turn but never carried out. The community did not feel that it was sufficiently honoured and represented by this place. This provoked resentment and disagreements with regards to the politics of getting involved with the authorities in order to make the day of *hazkharah* official and recognized. Above all else, the choice of place became a major source of conflict inside of the *edah*: there were those who believed that only Mount Herzl (the place where big official commemorations are celebrated, in particular *yom ha-zikkaron*) could meet the purpose, those who might have accepted another place as long as it was located in Jerusalem, those who would have been happy with any place on the condition that it was official and those who wanted to keep the ceremony at Ramat Rahel because they considered it symbolically relevant. It was hard to accept that a monument could

7 Baruch Kimmerling, *The Invention and decline of Israeliness*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press, 2001, p. 156 revealed that “The Ethiopians feel that the heroic story of their arrival in Israel has not been sufficiently included in the pantheon of Zionism heroism, and that this omission from Israeli collective memory reflects their marginality in Israel society in general”.

8 The importance of the *andarta*, the Ethiopian memorial for the dead, has also been mentioned by A. Poskanzer, *Ethiopian Exodus: a Practice Journal*, Jerusalem 2000, p. 141.

be constructed in any other place other than that, which by this point, had been considered for a long time “the place” of commemoration and which had already been partially symbolically transformed into a place of memory.

Another source of disagreement also regarded who should be commemorated: according to some members of the *edah*, the ceremony should commemorate not only those who died during operation Moshe but also those who died while waiting to leave for Israel (during the second operation, *mivzah* Shelomo). They felt the day should represent a shared time of the commemoration for all Ethiopians who died for the dream of arriving in Zion, without distinguishing at what moment and place they perished. In fact, it meant constructing a day of collective memory, shared by all Ethiopian Jews, without discriminating against anyone. A sign of the recomposition of the fracture and the construction of this memorial event was given by the introduction of the lighting of two torches during the *hazkarah* ceremony that university students began some years ago at the Bar Ilan University, one for the memory of those who died during the Moshe operation and another for those during the operation Shelomo. However, it must also be stressed that it is typical of the Jewish tradition to attribute different meanings to the same day of commemoration.

The phase of uncertainty over the place concluded on the 30th of September of 2003 when the Israeli High Court of Justice, was called to make a ruling following the raising of charges on the part of a few associations<sup>9</sup>. They succeeded in finding an agreement between the various parties of the case by establishing that an *andarta* should be raised on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem. In the meantime, while that monument was being erected, and, in any case, for another seven years, the previously chosen place (Ramat Rachel) could continue to be used as a place of annual commemoration without prejudice. Even after the construction of the new commemorative monument on Mount Herzl, those would like to continue to consider Ramat Rachel as a place of commemoration could do so. That decision<sup>10</sup> put an end to the long diatribe over the place of memory, allowing Ramat Rachel to continue being considered the place of burial of those who were unable to fulfil their dream of reaching Israel. This inscribed it as a sign of recognition for the necessity to institutionalize the event inside civil Israel religion (the location on Mount Herzl) without creating discontinuity with the symbolic construction and previous identity. That decision, therefore, healed the splitting within the Ethiopian community, who had made a symbolic investment in the choice of a place. It was taken to the point where it became a question of the absence of a place for the Ethiopian community inside Israeli society.

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9 In particular, one activist of the *edah* (Uri Rada) fought for many years for the monument to be constructed and created the associations *hazkharat yehude Etiopia she-nifteru be-Sudan be-derekh le-Zion*. This association was joined by other associations: the association for the defence of human rights, the association *la Le-qiddum morashat yehude Etiopia*, the association *Atid ha-kehillah ha-etiofit bi-Israel*, the movement for the struggle against poverty.

10 Made in accordance with the Israeli government represent by the Minister and the Vice-Minister of Integration along with the Minister of Education and with the kibbutz Ramat Rachel.

In addition, the decision to publicly announce that *hazkarah* would become a day of national commemoration, on the occasion of the day of the *segd* celebration in 2003, inscribed both days in the ritual time of national memory<sup>11</sup>.

### Celebration practices: “If you put a cat in a corner, you will turn it into a lion”

I was able to participate and observe the celebration on the day of *hazkharah* in 2002 (May 9).

In the big clearing a large awning had been erected to shade the participants from the sun. Behind, on a long table covered in a white tablecloth stood a hundred or so *gesotch*, in traditional clothing, with sticks and fly swatters, taking cover from the sun under brightly coloured traditional Ethiopian umbrellas. Israeli flags were flying everywhere while many Ethiopian soldiers wandered about the clearing. A group of young Ethiopians wearing *qippah* prayed together reading prayer texts in Hebrew. Other groups, mostly made up of young Ethiopians, were standing near the officials’ table holding big protest signs. It seemed that the protest was mainly in the hands of the young women of the *edah*. The signs read:

“If you put a cat in a corner, you will turn it into a lion”, “In end the end what have we asked for them?”, “Their voice demands respect”, “may troubles come to the generation who lose their traditions”, “4000 eyes are watching and observing us today”, “The blood of 4000 dead requires that they be brought honour”, “You left them to die there, here you scorn their memory”, “remembering them today means finding an immediate solution”, “They have hard to a piece of land”, “Remember and do not forget”.

The themes evoked on the signs were concerned with the *place* for the dead but also suggested once more the question of the marginal *place* in Israeli society reserved for the rest of the surviving community. This was summarised well in the protest phrase “If you put a cat in a corner, you will turn it into a lion”, a phrase that is currently used by Palestinians to stress their condition and to explain their transformation into militants. Marginality was reaffirmed by the young people’s speeches during the ceremony. At times, they hindered some politicians, considered responsible for the precarious situation and marginalization, from saying their speeches.

The ceremony started with the lighting of a large torch and the offering of a crown of flowers, while on one side of the clearing many candles burned in a cave beside photos that commemorated the dead. Some offered bread while others refused to drink water because they were fasting despite the heat that day.

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11 An interview and an article at the Ministry of Integration have been dedicated to *Yediot Nagat*, a *edah* newspaper in Hebrew and Amharic, (no. 22, February 2004).

At the table of honour an Ethiopian from the *edah* elected to the *Knesset*, the Mayor of Jerusalem and the President of the State had taken their places. The protest followed precise choreography in which institutional representatives from the State, such as the president, the head rabbi and the head of the Hebrew Agency, were given the right to speak, while political personalities such as the Minister of Integration, the Minister of Integration's counsellor and the Mayor of Jerusalem were loudly hushed up.

Respect was given to the parliamentarian from the Ethiopian *edah* despite the rumours that the monument could not be erected at Ramat Rahel because the kibbutz was opposed.

The President start by taking up the theme of national unity (belonging to one people and with one destiny) and of the founding fathers (the first Zionists, the work of the *halutzim*) and concluded by reassuring those present of the permanence of the Jewish people despite Israel's many enemies (Nabuccodonosor, Antioco, Tito, the Inquisition, Hitler). The head Ashkenazi rabbi reminded the audience of the importance of *qibbutz galuyyot*, the gathering of the dispersed. He had some success when he mentioned a phrase from rav Kook according to whom it was necessary to distinguish between who arrived in Israel like a cloud blown by the wind (like the rabbi himself, who arrived in Israel from a concentration camp in Europe when he was twelve years old) and those who were like doves returning to their home, like the Ethiopian Jews. The groups of young people holding the protest signs would not let the mayor of Jerusalem speak. The same treatment was measured out to the Minister of Integration, who was accused of lying. The young people remind them polemically that Ethiopian Jews came to Israel because they were Zionists and they had a right to be recognized in full title as part of the Jewish people.

The representative of the Jewish Agency, however, was not interrupted as he recalled the crossing through the desert as a unifying moment for all Jewish people, linking the exodus of the Jews from Egypt with that of the Ethiopian Jews.

The ceremony was closed by two young Ethiopians, a man and a woman who, he in Hebrew and she in Amharic, became the witnesses of the closing ceremonies and the guarantors for the continuity of the transmission of memory.

The ritual summarized and symbolically condensed the memory of the *edah* from the founding events, the exodus and the destruction of part of the community in the name of Zion and Zionism, in such a way that it allowed for the inscription of a new *edah* upon the body of Israeli society.

### The transmission of memory between generations: between *hazkharah* and *segd*

The two young people closed the ceremony by reassuring their elders of their responsibility to remember. But how was the continuity of memory between generations assured especially in the lack of a structured and precarious place? How

was this identity that was still confused by *hazkarah* to be transmitted? What was the difference between *segd* and *hazkarah* for the students? To answer these questions, I interviewed a number of Ethiopian students from the University of Bar Ilan, an institution where a considerable number of Ethiopian students study<sup>12</sup>, in March 2004.

Starting from to 2000, the initiative to celebrate either *segd* or *hazkarah* was begun at this university; it is a way of taking back one's own past that needs to be represented in the public sphere and affirmed in front of the rest of the student body. The ceremony takes place in a hall of the university<sup>13</sup> and begins with the lighting of two torches (like for *yom zikkaron*) while each student lights a number of candles that corresponds with the number of relatives who perished on the occasion<sup>14</sup>. The ritual is made official by the participation of student representatives, invited people from outside and people who give testimony of their experience or that of others that have been passed on by family, by the reading of a student's *qinah* that recounts what happened to her, by the reading of Psalms and prayers and ending with a song that narrates the events.<sup>15</sup> The ritualisation of the ceremony inside the university made it possible to remember thanks to the participation of witnesses who acted as key players in the construction of the memory of the event founding the Ethiopian identity in absence of a place of memory.

From the interviews it emerges that, on one hand, the identity that distinguishes this day of commemoration<sup>16</sup> is still murky and, on the other, that they would like this day of memory to become part of the Israeli narrative in the same way as the memory of the "*shoah* of the Jews from Ethiopia"<sup>17</sup>. The fact that many students had a vague notion of where *hazkharah* took place, but many remembered a kibbutz in Jerusalem as the chosen location, seemed to me to indicate that the kibbutz, the

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12 In 1999 there were 185 Ethiopian students with Bachelors degrees at Bar Ilan, out of a total of 553 in the whole country, cfr. Shelomo Swirsky, Barbara Swirski, "Ethiopian Israelis: Housing, Employment, Education", *The Israeli Equality Monitor*, 11 (June 2002): 39. The choice of Bar Ilan can be explained by the fact that this university presents itself as a traditional religious university and less "secular" than others. The majority of the students interviewed declared themselves "massorti" (religious moderates).

13 It is a room that changes every year and that the students association assigns it to Ethiopians for organizing the ceremony.

14 An interviewee told me that one student lit four or five.

15 It was a memorial poem written by Shelomo Gronikh.

16 Seventeen students from Bar Ilan were interviewed, 7 men and 9 women and a woman who worked in the cafeteria at the university. Two were key informants: a lawyer active in the *irgun ha-gag* association (an institution that promoted the event) and an activist of the *edah* that created the associations *hazkharat yehude Etiopia she-nifteru be-Sudan be-derekh le-Zion*, as well as the head of the initiative at the High Court of Justice. None of them were born in Israel and the students were between eighteen and twenty six years old. They were students studying Electrical Engineering, Biotechnology, Criminology, Sociology, Anthropology, Political Science, Economics, Israeli Literature and History.

17 It was defined in this way by some of the students interviewed.

sanctuary par excellence of Israeliness, conferred a particular meaning to the commemoration, contributing and identifying it and setting it off as Israeli.

Between the two days, *segd* is the better known celebration amongst students who consider it an event where participation is convivial, in contrast to what happens for *hazkharah*. The majority of the nineteen interviewed had participated at *segd* (often many times) and amongst them also *hazkharah* but not the other way around, or rather there was no one who had participated at *hazkharah* without having gone to *segd* as well<sup>18</sup>. Taking part in the *hazkharah* ceremony indicated a major awareness of belonging to the *edah* and the desire to identify themselves in a militant way with the Ethiopian Israeli community, considered one amongst the *edot* that make up Israeli society. If going to *segd* indicated a community-family type of identity sharing, a way to meet with other Ethiopians dispersed all over the country and to introduce part of the Ethiopian past into the new Israeli context, a sort of re-Ethiopianisation of the new identity configuration, going to *hazkharah* corresponded to a jump to complete integration in the Israelisation process of the *edah*. Even the languages used indicated the difference: *segd* became the Amharic celebration, *hazkharah*, the Hebrew celebration. Many students underlined that often it was not clear to even themselves why they went to *segd*, besides the fact that they were happy to meet others from the *edah*, while going to *hazkharah* meant consciously engaging in one's own history and making it known to others, by taking up the thread of transmission between generations and between Jewish Ethiopians and the rest of Israel. Those who had been to *hazkharah* confirmed the profession of Zionism on the part of Ethiopian Jews, always yearning to return to Jerusalem (it was of little consequence that this aspiration fell into a mythical-religious or nationalist discourse) and the fact that the Ethiopian *aliyyah* had been an ideological *aliyyah* and not economic and as such they wanted to be recognized by Israeli society.

The contrasts that had distinguished the reinvention phase of the *segd* celebration and the elaboration of the ritual within the *edah*, indicated by Abbink, were recomposed, while a split between generations started to develop. At *segd* the students felt obliged to participate because of social necessity but they felt marginalized because the whole ceremony was held in Amharic and in *ghez*, that is to say languages that the young people for the most part did not understand. For the elders, *segd* was a day of prayer and memory connected to the Ethiopian past; for the young it was a day of communitary re-socialisation. For everyone, *segd* represented a celebration of the Ethiopian *edah*, much in the same way the *Mimuna* could have been for Jewish Moroccans. The importance given to the day of *segd* by both the *edah* and Israeli society is demonstrated by the fact that that day is very well organised, from the point of view of the logistics (many coaches that bring the people), to that of communication (all of the *edah* is aware of it because it is

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18 From those interviewed, five had been to *hazkharah* in Jerusalem (one female student twice, another three, four times) and of these three one had arrived in 1983-5 and two in 1991.

announced on the Amharic radio) and very efficient from the point of view of the political discourse (the organizations and the political representatives were very much involved).

*Hazkharah* is configured differently: it appears to be a typically Israeli commemoration that can be included amongst Israeli civil celebrations. It is not by chance that this commemoration is associated by those interviewed with *yom ha-shoah* or *yom-zikkaron*. *Hazkharah* has been defined as “our *yom ha-shoah*” and as a day that involves everyone, even those who did not lose family, exactly like the *shaoh*. Many students thought that it would have been fitting if the ritual was similar to that of *yom zikkaron* and the appropriated language was Hebrew and not Amharic. Considering the fact that all of the students interviewed (besides one) had a parent who died during the Moshe operation (both those who arrived during the Moshe operation as well as Shelomo)<sup>19</sup>, all thought that it did not make a difference whether one arrived in Israel in 1984 or in 1991, to be of Tiger or Gondar origins<sup>20</sup> because the ceremony represented the history of the *edah* in its entirety.

The organisation of the *hazkharah* is less efficient than that of *segd*, most of all because there is no organising apparatus. A major part of the information is disseminated through informal communication, following the drum of the *edah* and often late (some see it on the television as the ceremony is ending). In addition, as I have underlined above, the uncertainty and the precariousness of the place, a metaphor for the “loss of a place” for the *edah* in Israeli society, justified, according to the students, the lack of participation. The absence of a place for *hazkharah* became a metonym for the Ethiopian *edah* itself, making it possible for the day to take on the nature of a protest, giving voice to the malaise of the *edah*.

The students complained about the fact that they had to wait eighteen years before the official decision was made to also allow Ethiopian Jews to remember their own heroes and they denounced what they considered discrimination with regards to the *edah*, in that they were sure that they would not have had to wait so long if it had been another community. The necessity for their history to become national history was expressed by the request that the dead be remembered by all of Israel and that memory is not limited to only one day of the year, but is transmitted to the new Israeli generation through books in school<sup>21</sup>. In the interviews it became evident that there was a discourse indicating a request for the integration of the narrative of what has been defined as the Ethiopian *shoah*, the dramatic voyage undertaken to come to Zion, and more generally the history of the Ethiopian *aliyyah*, into the general history of the Jewish people<sup>22</sup>. A strong need to be fully recognized as part of Israeli

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19 A grandfather, a sister, the grandparents’ brother, an uncle, an aunt, a mother, a brother.

20 Of the 19 interviewed 9 had arrived during the Moshe operation, 7 during the Shelomo, one in 1989 and two in 1998.

21 An initiative that provides for the collection of names of those who perished in the march to Israel (until present nearly a thousand have been recorded) was undertaken by different Ethiopian associations.

22 On the problem of the inclusion of one’s own past in Israeli history and the weight of the shoah

society could be felt in these claims. The students also demonstrated that they adhered to the shared values of society with regards to the model of Jewish heroism in the moment in which they affirmed that their dead were heroes who died to reach Zion. The inscription on the body of a visible wound caused by a fall from a horse during the journey of one of the interviewed students became a tangible sign of heroism that was being exhibited<sup>23</sup>.

The subject of the negation of the Diaspora, an essential element for Israeli identity construction is starting to become a contested discourse even by Ethiopian Jews, after have been by the *mizrahim*, so that both would like their own history, prior to their arrival in Israel, to be publicly recognized.

In conclusion, I wanted to illustrate the difference between the two days for the Jews of Ethiopia, that of *segd* and that of *hazkarah*, to underline how the latter is becoming a place of memory built on the founding myth of the new Ethiopian *edah*, a traumatic event that is assimilated in the imagination of the community to the *shaoh* and that demands to be inscribed in the national narrative. The Ethiopian *edah* has therefore symbolically constructs itself through the memory of the dead, in the same way in which Israel society has constructed itself, reinforcing its own identity on the occasion of two national days of memory, *yom ha-shoah we-ha-gevurah* and *yom ha-zikkaron*.

It can be supposed that the decision of the Israeli High Court of Justice to officially institute a place of commemoration and to inscribe it in the national commemoration time produces the effect of transforming even more the day of *yom Yerushalayim* into the day of the symbolic refoundation of the Jewish-Ethiopian *edah*.

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in this mythical reconstruction see Raya Cohen, "The European past: myth, history and historiography" a paper presented on 18.1.2004 at the Jewish history workshop at the University of Venezia.

23 Many had heard their parents' stories who told of the long march on foot, hunger, thirst and years spent in refugee camps in Sudan.