

Women in the menstruation huts: variations in preserving purification customs among ethiopian immigrants.(Essay)

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This article presents a unique case of activism among women immigrants from Ethiopia to Israel, in their attempt to preserve the custom of the menstruation huts (margam gojos) in their new social reality. In Ethiopia, Jewish women retire to a special remote but in the village named margam gojo, meaning "curse hut," during menstruation. Immigration to Israel brought changes to many aspects of life, including religious ones. Cicurel and Sharaby present the various ways in which women of kessoch (Ethiopian religious leader) families have responded to the Israeli demand that they relinquish their Ethiopian purification customs, from giving up their customs and adopting Jewish ones to building an Israeli version of the margam in their personal backyards. The different practices of the custom in Ethiopia and in Israel indicate a syncretic integration between the Ethiopian culture and Israeli society, which affords a solution to the immigrant's new identity and enables the kessoch's wife to empower herself and her status in Israel.

In a modern urban area at the center of Israel, close to a major highway and shopping malls, a small building serves as a traditional purification hut (margam gojo) for women immigrants from Ethiopia. This hut sits at the far end of the yard in which the house of the kessoch (Ethiopian religious priest) is located, and comprises an Israeli alternative to similar margam gojos that exist in Ethiopia. Reminiscent of a toolshed due to its location, covering, and size, the hut contains a small room, bathroom, and kitchenette. Amenities in the margam are minimal: there are a few utensils, some pieces of equipment, and basic furniture. Ethiopian women emphasize, however, that the place is "parallel to home," or as one young woman who uses it stated, "This is my home during menstruation."

In this article, we examine the establishment of menstruation huts (margam gojos) in Israel for female immigrants from Ethiopia, which kessochs' wives initiated after prolonged conflicts with Israeli institutions and cultural norms and with their husbands. Our research has focused on the gendered aspect of these separate women's spaces, and we examine how the purification custom has changed over time. Ultimately, we show how women with low status in society use religious customs for their empowerment. (1)

Between 2005 and 2006, our research on Ethiopian immigrants led us to three active menstruation huts in Israel. (2) The margams belong to kessoch-headed families and are located at various spots in Israel. As two Jewish (not of Ethiopian origin) women, we were intrigued by the different ways in which the Jewish laws of purity are practiced among immigrant women. We were allowed into a margam that was under renovation. We were not allowed into other huts when menstruating women were there, because of the kessoch's concern that we would be rendered impure. The refusal may have been simply because the place is private, and we respected their request. The issues of purity and menstrual huts are prominent for most Ethiopian immigrants. However, we chose to focus on kessochs' families, because we believe that women may have a harder time coping with the new culture because they are committed to tradition.

The anthropological literature on women and religion attributes a significant role to women's menstruation and purification rituals as major components of their personal and social identity, while emphasizing female subordination to the male social structure. The theoretical approach that was prevalent in the 1980s focused on the exclusion of bleeding women as an expression of female inferiority and explained that some cultures excluded their bleeding women, even relegating them to menstruation huts. (3) On the one hand, these perceptions were based on Victor Turner's theories about blood as a powerful cultural symbol, as well as the research by Mary Douglas, who claimed that rituals related to the body represent social contradictions and that the private body and social collective reflect each other in the symbolic field. (4) On the other hand, Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb's book, *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation*, challenged the image of a universal taboo regarding menstruation that acts identically in all cultures and emphasizes female inferiority. (5)

More recently, a Foucauldian discussion has developed that emphasizes how the body represents cultural and political statements and presents women's exclusion as sometimes having the perhaps ironic effect of serving women's aims or aspirations. This theoretical framework provides the basis for research that views

menstruation as having symbolic and constructed relations with cultural codes. This research also emphasizes the advantages that women may extract from menstruation, such as rest and spiritual fulfillment. (6) Other research points to how menstruation can provide opportunities for female bonding and empowerment. (7) These arguments relate to Rachel Adler's important book *Engendering Judaism*, which examines Jewish women's construction of a gendered religious place and how women are able to manipulate in many ways the overarching patriarchal system. (8) Other literature presents women's bleeding as ambivalent, and focuses on the gender advantages women may gain from endocentric exclusion. (9) Current discussions on menstruation also stress the diversity of attitudes in different cultures toward the phenomenon and illustrate how cultures change their attitudes toward menstruation and related customs as time goes by. (10)

The women we interviewed, similarly to the studies presented above, present a variety of attitudes and beliefs toward menstruation and the proper religious and social manner for handling it. The endocentric exclusion of menstruating women led women to protestation and resistance. Following Foucault, researchers have argued that women have been able to use menstruation as a means for expressing gender resistance, especially in ways that are unique to women. (11) These studies present menstrual rituals as a major symbol of resistance to male dominance and the reshaping of gender roles, especially for immigrants. (12)

The above-mentioned studies present ways of using menstruation for defining femininity, such as verbal objections or renewed definitions of menstruation as affording women spiritual, social, and personal advantages. We support this research and present a unique case for the active, physical, and prominent resistance of women who choose, initiate, and fight for their right to determine how to continue their menstrual customs. The women of the kessoch families that we interviewed are mostly independent Israeli women. Many are professional women and have absorbed Western feminist messages. Nonetheless, they fight to practice elements of their traditions out of choice. Israeli reality, because of its stereotypic attitude and its overt and covert demands for assimilation, makes it hard to preserve the Ethiopian tradition. (13) The women of the kessoch family thus need to be especially strong and assertive in order to continue the Margam gojo custom, because many agencies (religious and secular, male and female, veteran and new immigrants) have reservations about this custom.

The Margam in Ethiopia

The Jews were known in Ethiopia as Beta Israel. They lived in villages near rivers, a choice that stemmed from the need for running water for purification...