

Seven Decades of Torah Life in the State of Israel 1988–1997

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OPERATION SOLOMON

In the decades since the founding of the State of Israel, the Jewish community has witnessed many of the prophecies of redemption recorded in the *Nevi'im Achronim*. One such notable occasion was in late May of 1991, when, in a clandestine military action called Operation Solomon, the Israeli Defense Forces evacuated over 14,000 Ethiopian Jews from Addis Ababa to Israel in the course of two days. While operations Moses and Joshua in the 1980s had already initiated the mass influx of Ethiopian Jews to Israel, the impressive nature of the 1991 operation captured the attention of the global Jewish community. At the conclusion of the operation, when the Israeli government revealed the details of the endeavor, the world stood in awe; after forty flights in thirty-five planes, almost the entire Jewish

community of Ethiopia had been relocated to Israel. The record they set for passengers in an airplane — 1,088 in an El Al 747 with its seats removed, according to Guinness — remains the world record, and includes two babies born in flight.

Many excited witnesses were confident that they were seeing the actualization of the words of Yeshayahu, 11:11:

והיה ביום ההוא יוסיף ה' שנית ידו לקנות
את שאר עמו אשר ישאר מאשור וממצרים
ומפטרס ומכוש ומעילם ומשנער ומחמת
ומאיי הים.

And it will be on that day, Hashem will again increase His hand, to acquire the remnant of His nation which is left, from Assyria, and from Egypt, and from Pasros, and from Kush, and from Elam, and from Shinar, and from Chamas, and from the islands.

Usually in Tanach, the land of Kush seems best identified as a part of Africa; in particular, the area South of Egypt, and the historical location of the ancient Kingdom of Kush (circa. 800 BCE-350 CE). Understanding the verse this way, it would seem that, in the evacuation of the Ethiopians, this element of Yeshayahu's prophecy was coming true.

However, when it comes to this particular reference, the *Targum Yehonasan* seems dissatisfied with this typical approach. While through most of Tanach the Targum doesn't actually translate Kush and just transliterates it, a number of times he instead translates it as Hodu or India. (See Isaiah 18:1 and Tzephania 3:10.) That there would be confusion about the term is not surprising, since there were two different kingdoms, on opposite sides of the Ancient world,

with very similar names. Toward the twilight of the African Kingdom of Kush, the Asian Kushan Empire sprung up for a few centuries in what is now northern India and Pakistan, including the mountain range still known as the Hindu Kush, on the Pakistan-Afghan border. The Empire organized at about the year zero, and had influence in Asia for almost 400 years. The origin of its name is unclear, and while the Empire clearly did not exist during the time of the *Nevi'im*, historians are unsure regarding how long the term Kush had been used to describe the geographic area.

In two of the places in which the *Targum Yehonasan* translates Kush as Hodu (Yeshaya 18:1 and Tzephania 3:10), the prophet refers to “Naharei Kush,” the rivers of Kush. Considering that Nubia is mostly desert, and like Egypt, dependent on the Nile as the primary water source, it is possible that the mention of rivers is what pushed

the Targum to deviate from his usual identification of Kush as African.

The dispute regarding the location of Kush is even recorded in the Gemara (*Megillah* 11a). Regarding the first pasuk of Esther, which notes that Achashverosh ruled “From Hodu to Kush,” Rav and Shmuel disagree. One says that Kush was near Hodu, apparently identifying it with the geographic area of the Hindu Kush, adjacent to the Indian subcontinent, and near Persia, the seat of Achashverosh’s power. The other says that Kush was far from Hodu, indicating the African location that we usually presume.

What remains a mystery is why in Yeshaya 11:11, the *Targum* identified the area with India instead of Africa, especially considering that, in the list in the pasuk, it follows Egypt and Pasros, Upper Egypt, squarely between Lower Egypt and the Kingdom of Kush. Perhaps he was

swayed by the latter half of the verse, which lists Elam, Shinar, and Chamas, locations in Mesopotamia and Central Asia, to identify Kush with those locations instead.

When we look at history, however miraculous, it is comfortable for us to fit modern events into the prophecies we have preserved for millennia, but often, in our haste to connect our present with our past, we can overlook details of our tradition. But the reality that the IDF managed to relocate the Ethiopian Jewish community to Israel over a weekend doesn’t need to have been prophesied to be miraculous. If the decades since the State was founded have taught us anything, it is that prophecy is not the only way Hashem speaks to us in the modern world. Sometimes we hear the voice of God out of the pages of the prophets, and at other times, in the newspaper headlines, as we continue to carve out our destiny in Eretz Yisrael.



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