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# Shimella Community Theatre of Israeli-Ethiopian Jews

Shimella ('stork' in Amharic) is an Israeli community theatre of Ethiopian Jews residing in Netanya and directed by Chen Elia. Shimella was founded in 2010, and has produced four different performances focusing on the Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel. Ethiopian Jews suffer from racism and discrimination in all areas of life, including housing, employment, education, and healthcare. These issues surfaced in Shimella's performances, and the political aspect of Shimella's performances therefore ranges from performing critical protest against the attitudes of the Israeli state and society toward Ethiopians, to a utopian performative moment, which emotionally and physically dramatizes the community's desired future.

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SHIMELLA ('stork' in Amharic) is an Israeli community theatre of Ethiopian Jews residing in Netanya and directed by Chen Elia. Shimella was founded in 2010, and has produced four different performances focusing on the Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel. Ethiopian Jews have been immigrating to Israel since 1977, and while viewed by the Israeli establishment as part of the Zionist ethos of the return of Jews to the 'historical homeland', they also suffer from racism and discrimination in all areas of life, including housing, employment, education, and healthcare. Consequently, they struggle with an immigration crisis involving unemployment, poverty, drug use, suicide, and domestic violence.

Framed as personal and social experiences, these issues surfaced in the creation of Shimella's performances as part of a devising theatre process. In writing and directing the performances, Chen Elia, who is not of Ethiopian origin, employed techniques of epic theatre to create a political theatrical event. This article

argues that the political aspect of Shimella's performances ranges from performing critical protest against the attitudes of the Israeli state and society toward Ethiopian Jews, to a utopian performative moment, which emotionally and physically dramatizes the community's desired future. According to Jill Dolan:

Utopian performatives persuade us that beyond this 'now' of material oppression and unequal power relations lives a future that might be different, one whose potential we can feel as we're seared by the promise of a present that gestures toward a better later. The affective and ideological 'doings' we see and feel demonstrated in utopian performatives critically rehearse civic engagement that could be effective in the wider public and political realm.<sup>1</sup>

This is not a 'utopia' in the sense of a closed political paradigm; rather, it is a temporary experience between all participants in the event and not as the realization of specific and concrete content. This is a moment in which sensitivities and sensibilities surface, a time when

social and political options, which are not existent in the present, are experienced, and which the performance establishes within its framework. The utopian performative is principally transformative. While the performance forges, by way of aesthetic realization, a communal experience that does not yet exist in the social reality, it at the same time carries the potential for its future realization.

While protest performance opposes racism and discrimination, to various degrees, the utopian performative in Shimella's repertoire dramatically realizes a hope and desire for change, strengthens solidarity among the Ethiopian community, and creates the experience and vision to which it aspires. For the Ethiopian Jewish community, which lacks representation in the public space, this is an opportunity to engage with its unique issues and experiences, which are otherwise unfamiliar to the Israeli public at large. The utopian performative evolves within the theatrical event not only due to the sensitive and empathetic representation of these core issues, but mainly because it constitutes the self-representation of actors from within the community. Moreover, this visibility is realized by way of additional cultural markers, such as speaking Amharic alongside Hebrew, playing live Ethiopian music, and the use of traditional costumes and props.

In addition, the performances' endings are most often cautiously optimistic, offering resolutions to the social conflicts rooted in an act of communal solidarity as a way to cope with its difficulties. However, while these endings provide the community with a sense of hope, they avoid idealizing the outcomes or whitewashing the challenges. In these optimistic endings, the community articulates what it aspires to in the social reality and dramatizes this vision on stage. In other words, the utopian performative is employed at the end of the narrative to underline that the community is capable of drawing on its own resources, as opposed to external factors, to cope with and improve its present difficult circumstances.

### **Ethiopian Jews in Israel**

There are currently around 155,000 Ethiopian Jews and descendants residing in Israel.<sup>2</sup>

Approximately one-third of Ethiopian-born Jews immigrated to Israel in two major waves, 'Operation Moses' (1977–84) and 'Operation Solomon' (1991), while immigration in small numbers continues up to this day. Viewed as an exodus involving an arduous journey by foot, 'Operation Moses' became a seminal ethos of the immigrants' suffering and heroism – during the journey, 4,000 perished while others were robbed and injured – as well as the strengthening of their Jewish identity and a realization of their religious vision of entering the Promised Land. Following a struggle for official recognition, in 2007 a monument commemorating those lost was inaugurated on Mount Herzl, and a memorial ceremony is held annually on Jerusalem Day. In 2008, the state recognized the *Sigd*, a unique Ethiopian Jewish festival, as an official state holiday.

Ethiopian Jews were historically separated from world Jewry, therefore their religious traditions raised doubt among the Israeli religious establishment as to the authenticity of their Jewishness. Their distinct characteristics – such as religious and cultural customs, language, clothing, and skin colour – remained a basis for racist attitudes towards them. This in turn led to overall discrimination in all aspects of life (education, housing, health, employment – as much, or more, in the public sector as in the private), resulting in the reality that most Ethiopian Jews have a low socio-economic status and low level of education, live in underprivileged areas, and suffer from unemployment and a high crime rate. The immigration crisis and such unsatisfactory state policies destabilized the traditional family structure, thereby leading to increased rates of domestic violence and of women murdered by their husbands,<sup>3</sup> as well as suicide rates far in excess of those in the general population.<sup>4</sup> This difficult situation is a result of discriminatory policies of the Israeli government over the last decades in most areas inhabited by Ethiopian Jews.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, this discrimination gave rise to a protest movement of Ethiopian Jews. For instance, in 1996, the media reported that Magen David Adom (the Israeli equivalent of the Red Cross) had decided that all blood donations given by Ethiopian Jews should be discarded for fear they might carry disease.

This led to widespread protests and the formation of a commission of inquiry to investigate the issue. Over the past decade, many Ethiopian youths suffered police violence,<sup>6</sup> which in several instances resulted in the killing of innocent youths. These instigated tempestuous protests inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Shimella Ensemble and the Language of Theatre**

Ethiopian-Jewish theatre in Israel, both professional and amateur, began to grow in the mid-1990s, as sites of self-representation in which predominantly Hebrew play-scripts are mixed, to various degrees, with Amharic. According to Sarit Cofman-Simhon, 'The Ethiopian Israeli theatre has made great efforts to devise a unique stage vocabulary, based on the Ethiopian language, its dances, and its rhythms, kneading them together to create an intercultural blend.'<sup>8</sup> Moreover, as an immigrant theatre, its thematic content is focused mainly on the conflicts of the immigration experience, such as adherence to tradition as opposed to assimilation in the cultural majority, generational gaps between immigrant parents and their Israeli-born children, and institutional discrimination. In fact, this content, which deals with the immigrant's relocation and their becoming strangers within the public sphere, informs the actor-immigrant's body on stage. According to Emma Cox, theatre 'about migration opens up bodily lexicons, as well as spatial syntaxes. Bodies on stage actualize stories with voice, accent, skin, and history'.<sup>9</sup> In this respect, the Ethiopian theatre negotiates between the categorical significances of race, nationhood, identity, displacement, and belonging by creating a dramaturgy and unique theatre language<sup>10</sup> based on materials related to its Ethiopian legacy, the immigration crisis, and its opposition to racism.

Chen Elia has been a director of community theatre and a high school drama teacher for over twenty years. Before founding the Shimella theatre, in 2005 she founded the Alon theatre group for Ethiopian youth at the Alon boarding school. Theatre scholar

Shulamith Lev-Aladgem claims that the Alon group is 'a cultural intervention that manages to problematize the ambivalent and displaced lived experiences of these young performers as diasporic subjects, and provides them with a critical, reflexive practice with which to confront their betwixt and between daily life'.<sup>11</sup>

In 2010, Mamoya Zara, an Ethiopian social worker, invited Elia, with whom he had collaborated in working with the Alon group, to form a community theatre group for Ethiopian adults at Netanya's Dora neighbourhood community centre. As one of the founders of the Joint's [American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee] Parent and Children Together programme, Zara had access to the resources necessary to finance the community theatre. The programme's aim was to bring about meaningful change in the domestic circumstances and generational gaps among Ethiopian immigrants and their children. Based on past experience with the Alon group, it perceived community theatre as a site of empowerment which could facilitate achieving these goals.

The Shimella group is comprised of five men and fifteen women, with several of the actors' children cast in the group's first performance.<sup>12</sup> While Elia coached the participants in acting, the material for the performances, as is the practice in devised theatre, was derived from the actors' personal stories. Devised theatre is part of cultural democratization in that it involves the participants' equal participation in the production process and 'because of the need to deal with topics of immediate relevance to community audiences rarely addressed by existing, written plays'.<sup>13</sup>

A particular example of this democratization is the way in which Shimella's participants chose to end the dramatized narratives of their performances. Given that, traditionally, narratives end with a reiteration of the performance's social statement, director Chen Elia proposed messages of protest as a way to stress that the dramatized conflicts are not resolved in a 'happy ending'. However, the members of the group opposed Elia's approach, claiming that an optimistic, rather than combative, ending would instil a sense of

hope in the audience. This resulted in endings that, while cautiously optimistic, neither idealized the solutions nor whitewashed the challenges. These endings can be defined as 'utopian performative' because what is enacted on stage points to the possibility of its actualization in reality: an ending that emphasizes the community's solidarity as a key factor in resolving crisis and adversity.

The process of creating the performances involved themes such as the arduous journey to Israel, the immigration crisis, institutional racism, domestic violence, women's status, and adolescent suicides. Despite differences between the various performances, they all featured staging devices associated with epic theatre, mainly the employment of 'empty space' and a collaborative acting mode as means to construct a political statement on stage. The 'empty space' is the point of origin for forming the *mise-en-scène* by alternately highlighting various images as they become charged with, and accumulate, meaning through a process of occupying and emptying the space. The 'empty space' principle is not conducive to mimetic representation; rather, it facilitates the formation of an image of reality and a political statement regarding this reality.

By filling and emptying the stage-space, Shimella's actors 'become' agents of their own life realities who can devise, through their bodies, how they are perceived. The actors employ the collaborative acting mode,<sup>14</sup> which involves sharing their thoughts and emotions with the audience by either assuming the role of 'storyteller' or by way of asides. This breaking of the 'fourth wall' is a fundamental feature of community theatre in which the joint participation of actors and spectators in a theatrical-communal event brings to the fore crucial issues and challenges that the community faces.

### *Shimella, Shimella* [Stork, Stork] (2010)

*Shimella, Shimella* [Stork, Stork] was the group's first production. It revolves around the theme of the Ethiopian Jews' immigration to Israel as a 'broken' dream. The performance has three main parts: the first, pastoral

life in the Ethiopian village; the second, the on-foot journey; and the third, the difficulties of immigration, the encounter with racism, the dismantling of the family, and adolescent suicides. The performance's focal point is the presentation of the heroic 'exodus' myth constituted in the on-foot journey from Ethiopia to Jerusalem.

Randomly positioned on the stage, the actors, each in their turn, convey to the audience, in a mixture of Amharic and Hebrew, memories from village life in Ethiopia: for instance, bathing in the river, herding sheep and goats, drinking milk straight from the cow, reciting the blessing over bread on the Sabbath, and a father telling his daughters folktales. Accompanied by musicians playing traditional instruments, such as the *krar* (a type of harp), the scene ends with a memory of songs of longing for Jerusalem. Each memory begins with the words 'I remember', followed by the group enacting the memory. Both the intermingling of Hebrew and Amharic and the transitions from past to present action, render the stage a space of nostalgic remembrance for pastoral village life. The ending, with its spiritual longing for Jerusalem, stresses the idea that the immigration was not prompted by socio-economic circumstances, but rather as a response to the community's messianic creed.

These songs of yearning for Jerusalem lead to the scene of the journey to Israel. Between 1977 and 1985, 20,000 Ethiopian Jews left their homes and embarked on a long trek to Sudan. The conditions were arduous, and the immigrants suffered hunger, disease, attacks by robbers, and even death. After arriving in Sudan, they were placed in temporary refugee camps for two years until they were finally flown to Israel. Approximately 4,000, one-fifth of those who had left Ethiopia, died en route.

On stage, the group forms a circle; they are carrying satchels on their shoulders (Figure 1). They move slowly and laboriously as soft music suggestive of the barren desert plays in the background. Positioned downstage to the right, Zehava tells the audience about the difficulties she endured on her journey, while the group performs the narrative:



**Figure 1.** *Shimella, Shimella*. Photographer: Boaz Nobelman. Courtesy of Boaz Nobelman.

Seventy-three of us embarked on the journey, after two weeks of walking, one hot morning, we reached the Ethiopian border . . . half an hour later, one old woman died, it was hot as hell . . . we buried her by the roadside . . . half an hour later, her sister died too. Another woman nursed a year-old baby, she fell, asked for water. Seven people laid down . . . The mother died, the child lived, refusing to leave his mother's breast. I tied a scarf to my back and carried the baby . . . Five more died . . . there are no birds, where are you, stork?! No life, soon we will all die. Suddenly the Sudanese arrived, gave us muddy water to drink, we buried the dead on the side of the road. We went on. On the way to Jerusalem, we had faith.<sup>15</sup>

As Zehava describes the deaths on the journey, one actress collapses in the middle of the circle while the others, whose attempts to revive her prove futile, lament, and then wrap the woman's body in a *natala* (a white Ethiopian scarf). The journey scene is a powerful feature of the collective memory of the Ethiopian audience watching the play.

Gadi BenEzer has noted that the journey myth, which is a key aspect of the community's

consciousness, is based on three themes: Jewish identity; suffering; and bravery/inner strength. According to BenEzer:

The story of their journey seems to play an important role in the process of adaptation and integration of the Ethiopian Jews into Israeli society. It is recounted among the Ethiopian Jewish community and is being used as a vehicle in the social dialogue which has evolved with Israeli society. It seems to have become their way of continuing the necessary journey within Israel, striving to 'arrive' in the social sense, to be accepted and integrated.<sup>16</sup>

BenEzer claims that this is 'a myth in the making' and that despite its similarity to the Zionist myth of 'From Calamity [Holocaust] to Revival [Tkuma]', which deals with Jewish suffering and heroism, Israeli society is unaware of the Ethiopian journey myth and, therefore, it is marginalized. Emma Cox points to myth – or more precisely, mythopoeics – as central to the politics of immigration theatre. 'Mythopoeics of migration – literally "myth making" out of migration,' she writes,

'describes an accumulation of visions of foreignness that have collided in the globalized, bureaucratized present.'<sup>17</sup> Despite its significance as a key aspect of Ethiopian Jews' identity, this myth has yet to become an integral part of the Zionist myth. Against this context, *Shimella, Shimella* shapes a mythopoetics on the stage as a 'myth in the making', with the aim of unifying the Ethiopian community and facilitating its integration in Israeli society.

Following Zehava's recollection of the journey, the actors perform the journey's end and the arrival in Israel (Figure 2). The immigrants are excited, and they kiss the ground and perform a blessing ceremony in Amharic. Soon after, however, upon encountering Israeli bureaucracy, the euphoria dissipates. A bureaucratic civil servant, played by Dikla Harnick-Zorea, the only non-Ethiopian actor in the ensemble, represents the melting-pot policy which negates the immigrants' Jewish-Ethiopian identity and socially marginalizes them. Without considering the meanings of

their original names and without their permission, she substitutes their Ethiopian names with Hebrew names. Such coerced Hebraization of names is a known Zionist practice which underscores both institutional patronage and the negation of identity constituted in an individual's name. The civil servant appears again at an employment agency where an immigrant applies for several jobs for which they believe they are qualified. By saying one thing, then contradicting herself, the bureaucrat leads the immigrant to believe that they are not qualified for any of the available positions. The scene ends with the unemployed immigrant addressing the audience in a forlorn tone of voice: 'I have to pay my bills and I don't have the means to.' As a consequence of discrimination, unemployment entails not only economic hardships, but also the breakdown of the family structure, violence, and suicidality.

The audience watches two types of Ethiopian families represented on stage: the family in



**Figure 2.** *Shimella, Shimella*. Photographer: Boaz Nobelman. Courtesy of Boaz Nobelman.

which tension is high, given a lack of healthy communication skills; and the ideal family that enjoys good communication, mutual assistance, and support. The spotlight alternates between the two. The deprived socio-economic circumstances of the real-life family cause tension between the couple and familial conflict, which eventually leads to the disintegration of the family fabric. On stage, a boy sits between his parents while they argue, blaming one another for their dire situation. The boy becomes introverted and depressed. In contrast, when the spotlight shifts to the ideal family, the audience sees a father who works outside the home, helps with household chores, and is attentive to his partner, and whose children do well in school.

This juxtaposition of families represents the tension between the real-life deprivation of Ethiopian Jews in Israel and the better life for which they long, but does not provide a tangible transit image of how the deprived family can extricate itself from its ongoing crisis. Instead, the juxtaposition of families forges an interweaving of an element of protest constituted in the image of the oppressed family, on the one hand, and the utopian performative representation of the ideal family, on the other, without explicitly articulating the transition from the dire to the desired state.

Different variations of the circle is the key element of the performance's direction, except for in family scenes in which it is tellingly broken. In the first part, the circle simulates the community's family life, and the long journey and its completion with the arrival in Israel. The journey is represented by the actors' sluggish pacing in a circular motion, which continues despite individuals sporadically dropping out of the circle. To represent the end of the journey, the actors, who are now positioned in a semi-circle, recite a blessing commemorating their arrival in the Promised Land. As a principal feature of the *mise en scène*, the semicircle acquires meaning and becomes symbolic of the community and its ability to support the individual and provide a safety net for them within the frequently changing reality. In the ensuing family scene, however, the circular

formation is broken, and the actors dispersed on stage represent individuals, each helplessly attempting to cope with the institutional suppression that ultimately leads to the family's breakdown. As each of his parents goes in a different direction, the boy loses his grip on the community, and, from here, he moves in the direction of suicide. The family's breakdown is enacted in the movement by the actors gradually leaving the stage.

Evoking the popular Amharic phrase, 'Shimella, shimella, [stork, stork,] our land Jerusalem, is it at peace?', the stork functions as a leitmotif for the longing for Jerusalem. In the performance, it appears in the form of a puppet, created by puppeteer Zohar Elias, and is operated alternately by the narrator and other actors. The operator moves the puppet's wings to represent the stork's symbolic agency in the Ethiopian tradition of a migratory bird that travels between countries and brings with it the message of peace from Jerusalem. In the performance, the stork bears witness not only to the immigrants' heroic journey to Jerusalem, but also to the hardships and racism they face in Israel. Thus, the stork embodies both the longing for Heavenly Jerusalem – the utopian Jerusalem – and the real-life Jerusalem of adversity and protest.

In the prologue, seven children and teens dressed in white form a line led by a girl holding the stork and operating its wings. They traverse the stage, which is bare, except for a heap of satchels positioned upstage. As the stork meanders among the actors, they begin by asking it, in both Amharic and Hebrew, 'Shimella, shimella, have you come from Jerusalem? What message do you bring?' then follow with a plea: 'Take us to Jerusalem, we'll come with you to Jerusalem.' The enquiry represents the desired world, in which the young generation peacefully migrates with the stork to Heavenly (utopian) Jerusalem.

In contrast to its symbolically optimistic function in these scenes, the stork also bears witness to the difficulties of the family's assimilation. An Ethiopian couple get married and have a child named Lior (Hebrew for 'my light'). The stork enters, and while peeking at the baby's pram, its operator declares,



**Figure 3.** *Shimella, Shimella*. Photographer: Boaz Nobelman. Courtesy of Boaz Nobelman.

anticipating a better future: 'Look child what I have brought you, a bird, it flies. Wherever you wish for it to take you, you will fly with it. What serenity, a smile on his face. The child is dreaming. From my view far above . . . a world of surprises awaits you' (Figure 3). However, the surprises are not good at all. The stork appears again when the boy becomes a teen and, given his parents' constant fighting, runs away from home. Following the stork, the boy expresses his sense of loss:

I'm going, I don't know where and don't care, my parents aren't listening to me anyway. I no longer have a home . . . I think I am turning into a bird. I want to fly. Far away from here, up. I'll see you and you'll be so small and I'll be free . . . and it won't hurt anymore.

The scene ends with the boy waving his arms, as if they were wings, 'flying' to the front of the stage. He then lies down, expressing a desire to commit suicide. Slowly, his parents, grandfather, and friends enter and surround

him in a semicircle. They implore him to return home, lift him, and wrap him in a *natala*. The stork operator crosses the stage as the grandfather says, 'This is a story with a happy ending, but it could have ended differently.' The grandfather reminds the audience that the reality of the community's situation is dire, and often ends tragically.

This optimistic ending is a utopian performative in that it is designed to evoke the community's desire for change, which is invariably contingent on the power of the community (and the theatre audience) to heal the individual. Notably, this ending reflects discussions among the participants during rehearsals. In these discussions, the director's vision of a critical and pessimistic ending in which the youth commits suicide was challenged by the actors, who opted for a more optimistic message highlighting the community's power to restore the individual's fortitude. Thus, the performance begins with a circle of children in white accompanied by the stork, and ends with





**Figure 4.** *Shimella, Shimella*. Photographer: Boaz Nobelman. Courtesy of Boaz Nobelman.

the image of the boy holding the stork while being brought back to life by the community (Figure 4).

#### *Ezer K'negdo [Helpmate] (2014)*

*Helpmate* focuses on the issue of domestic violence, and revolves around a story communicated to the group by one of the actors about the murder of her sister. The casting of this actor in the role of the battered wife not only facilitated the recounting of both a personal and a social process, but also inspired other group members to tell their own accounts of domestic violence. Although battered wives are commonly perceived as voiceless objects, Lev-Aladgem has shown how, through community theatre, they can be transformed into subjects who use their voices to reclaim their humanity and power.<sup>18</sup> *Helpmate* clearly presents a situation in which Ethiopian women can articulate their desire for change in male–female relations in both the family and the community. The performance tells the story

of a young Ethiopian couple's arranged marriage. Without any contact prior to their marriage, the couple's relationship is undermined by rumours and gossip, leading to a loss of trust between them and ultimately to domestic violence. Nevertheless, the play ends when the husband takes responsibility for his mistakes, and the couple is reconciled. As in *Shimella, Shimella*, here, too, the group was more inclined towards presenting an optimistic ending as opposed to the real-life tragic ending. The ending of the narrative, therefore, constitutes a utopian performative moment which points to the desired reform of a healthy, egalitarian, and reciprocal relationship.

While the Ethiopian Jewish community constitutes a mere 2 per cent of the general Israeli population, the number of wives murdered by their husbands in this community represents 28 per cent of overall cases.<sup>19</sup> In Ethiopia, the husband is the authoritative figure in the family whom the wife is expected to obey. Violence exercised by the husband

is perceived as an educational act. It is only when the violence is extreme that agents in the community interfere to mitigate the situation.<sup>20</sup> Michal Hisherik claims that although the immigration crisis exacerbated domestic violence among Ethiopian Jews, this phenomenon is also related to the prevalent patriarchal family structure in Israel. In Hisherik's view, the essence of the problem is strongly associated with the state's discriminatory policies toward Ethiopian women, as well as with the ineffective use of insufficient resources.<sup>21</sup>

The performance's underlying theme was the patriarchal framework and the lack of community support for the family in crisis. Whereas in Ethiopia the community came together to manage such crises, this communal unity dissolved as a consequence of immigration. In *Helpmate*, the community becomes an inciting factor, perceived as 'the monster of gossip and envy', whose sole objective is to destabilize the family unit. Rachel Sharaby, whose research focuses on, among other things, the breakdown of the Ethiopian family in Israel, argues that although seemingly counter-intuitive to modern Israeli conceptions of familial relationships, it is important that Ethiopian immigrants maintain their traditional way of life. In her view,

the existence of familial networks as a source of financial and social support in situations of immigration is a known phenomenon in Israel and around the world. It strengthens the argument that traditional kinship systems continue to exist in modern and postmodern industrial society and is adapted to the changing environment.<sup>22</sup>

The performance's theatrical language is comprised of three components: the two-fold leitmotif of the colours red and white; biblical verses presenting a patriarchal view of male-female relations; and epic theatre techniques. These three components are fused to create a symbolic language which transcends the episodic to articulate a general message regarding domestic violence.

In the opening scene, two couples appear on stage. Downstage, the man and women of the first couple are positioned at opposite ends

of the stage, each holding the end of a five-by-two-metre strip of red cloth. Upstage, the second couple is positioned likewise, holding a white strip of cloth of similar dimensions. A white strip runs the depth of the stage and a red strip runs along its front. Between the two strips, the chorus recites the biblical verse, 'And the Lord God said: It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him' (Genesis 2: 18).<sup>23</sup> This intertwining of biblical citations and the emblematic coloured cloths becomes a leitmotif throughout the entire performance.

The red and white cloths evoke the *keshera* (or 'knotting'), a traditional Jewish-Ethiopian wedding ceremony in which the *kais* (priest) twists the red and white cloths together (Figure 5). The white and red cloths symbolize the purity of the bridegroom and the bride, respectively. During the *keshera*, the *kais* gradually raises the entwined clothes from the bridegroom's feet to his head and then ties them around his forehead. Together, the intertwined cloths symbolize the matrimonial covenant between the bridegroom and the bride.<sup>24</sup>

The biblical verse introduces the patriarchal perception that the sole purpose of woman's divine creation is to accommodate man's needs, and it is this patriarchal view that reverberates in the entire performance through other biblical verses recited by the chorus. However, when combined with the red and white colour motif, these verses communicate a double meaning. On the one hand, the intertwining of the cloths, as representing the Ethiopian matrimonial custom, with such 'patriarchal' verses suggests that Ethiopian Jewish traditions – whose authentic Jewishness Orthodox rabbinical authorities doubt – are the same as the similarly patriarchal traditions of the Jewish people at large. On the other hand, precisely because they are biblical, the verses point to the universality of the patriarchal view and, consequently, to the notion that domestic violence is not unique to Ethiopian Jews, but rather a product of the patriarchy inherent in Jewish belief.

The bride and bridegroom prepare separately for the wedding ceremony. The preparation of the bride emulates the traditional



**Figure 5.** *Ezer K'negdo* [*Helpmate*]. Photographer: Raz Elia. Courtesy of Raz Elia.

Ethiopian custom in which older women are charged with the task. According to Sharaby, this ceremony demonstrates that 'the bride had to put her faith completely in the knowledgeable women responsible for handing down the cultural and social tradition to the brides and teaching them the new rules and behaviours'.<sup>25</sup>

In opposition to tradition, the bride is also surrounded by her younger friends. Thus, while the older women support the patriarchal order by advising the bride to be a 'good wife' ('Listen to your parents and respect their decision'; 'Love will come in good time'; 'You need to marry like everyone else'), by expressing their doubts regarding the bridegroom, the young women encourage the bride's desire for self-fulfilment: 'He's not for you'; 'You're too young, enjoy life'; 'He doesn't have a profession and steady job'; 'Don't listen to everything he says.'

Similarly, the preparation of the groom also conveys a double message. Dressed in white

clothing with a red tie, the bridegroom excitedly anticipates the wedding; however, standing beside him is a figure, representing his inner voice, who articulates, in the first person, doubts as to the bridegroom's ability to realize his manhood. The bridegroom openly expresses his hopes for the best ('I will make my parents happy and they will be proud of me'; 'They expect me to be a man now'), while the inner voice expresses doubt: 'How will I provide?'; 'What if the bride does not love me?'; 'I'm afraid.' At the end of the scene, all of the actors, except for the couple, form a chorus and recite the verse: 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother, and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh' (Genesis 2: 24).

Both scenes dramatize a conflict by using the externalized inner voice. In the case of the bride, the juxtaposition of the older and younger women represents the bride's internal conflict between the suppressive elements of tradition, on the one hand, and her desire for self-fulfilment or self-realization,

on the other. Likewise, the groom is trapped between what is traditionally expected in terms of his manhood, and his fear of not being able to realize these expectations. Despite these hesitations, the couple marry in accordance not only with the biblical creed ('they shall become one flesh'), but also with societal norms.

In the following scene, the couple's happiness is communicated through music and movement (Figure 6). Red rope is hung across the stage, representing a laundry line upon which the couple hang white shirts patterned with red hearts. Their faces express joy and contentment as they blow kisses to one another. The scene is constructed as a mirror drama game in which the couple perform precisely the same actions simultaneously, and it is unclear which one is leading the other. This mirror drama game suggest a harmonious relationship in which neither plays a dominant role. On the contrary, from a patriarchal viewpoint, the husband, who hangs up the laundry, performs a

traditionally feminine chore. In this manner, this scene constitutes a utopian performative moment in which there is potential for an egalitarian relationship between a husband and wife which contradicts the extant social reality.

In theatre, the chorus usually represents a collective voice. In this performance, it represents the Jewish-Ethiopian social environment, which, although charged with preserving the patriarchal order, at the same time inadvertently leads to the breakdown of the family structure and the ensuing domestic violence. While employed in various scenes, this more malevolent role is especially effective in two particular instances: first, when the chorus represents the neighbours as the collective 'gossip monster'; and second, when it enacts the husband's violence towards his wife.

As the malign 'gossip monster', the chorus encourages the husband to suspect his wife and beat her. Forming a line facing the audience, the members of the chorus hold a long



**Figure 6.** *Ezer K'negdo* [*Helpmate*]. Photographer: Raz Elia. Courtesy of Raz Elia.

red cloth. The ceremony is constructed around the anaphoric 'I heard that he . . .' or 'I heard that she . ..'. Each sentence states an aspect of the husband's or wife's unacceptable behaviour, as for instance 'I heard that he wastes money / I heard that he is a drunkard', or 'I heard that she does nothing in the home / I heard she is unfaithful'. Each actor in their turn articulates a replica while making a fold in the cloth and then passing it on to the next actor. Coincidentally, the texts become increasingly severe – 'I heard a noise in the house / I heard things breaking / I heard that she filed a complaint with the police' – until, finally, 'I heard that he beat her', and 'I heard that she went to the rabbinate [to file for a divorce]'. The scene ends with the bride walking across the stage as the onlooking chorus repeats a mere 'I heard that . ..'. The anaphoric 'I heard that he / I heard that she', combined with the folding of the red cloth, represents the 'gossip monster' as a social factor that bends and crushes the familial fabric. Here, the social environment is presented as sabotaging the couple's relationship as opposed to a community that mitigates the difficulties.

It is this lingering contentiousness that informs the next scene, which returns to the mutual laundry hanging. This time the relationship is fraught with accusations of lies and infidelities. This is no longer a symbolic event, but one that takes on the literal sense of the couple 'hanging out their dirty laundry', and exposing their troubled relationship for the entire community to see. This hostility evolves into physical violence, which is not represented mimetically on stage, but rather dramatized by the chorus. The actors gather closely together to form a type of monster with multiple heads that wraps the bride in the red cloth and suffocates her. Waving their hands maliciously, the actors chant: 'the monster of jealousy in the groom's body . . . gnawed her body . . . from there went to the stomach / the head / and finally, the hands.' Standing over what it has now rendered as the bride's embalmed body, the 'monster' recites the following verse from Song of Songs, 'For love is as strong as death, Jealousy as cruel as the grave' (Song of Solomon, 8: 6), which equates erotic love with mortal envy. This shift from

the particular case of the bride and bridegroom to a non-mimetic abstract dramatization of the 'monster of gossip and jealousy', combined with the fact that the bridegroom is no longer present, points to male violence as an integral aspect of the Jewish patriarchal order.

In the next scene, the bridegroom returns and unwraps his mummified bride. Together they fold the cloth and hand it to the chorus. Facing the audience, a member of the chorus describes the bride's dream ('When the bride became a wife, she dreamt of hands, touching, caressing, hugging, caring, loving'), and concludes with the following verse from Genesis: 'He created them male and female, and blessed them and called them Mankind in the day they were created' (Genesis 5: 2). As the verse is recited, the bride, bridegroom, and chorus smile at each other, and embrace to form a new image of both a supportive and empathetic family and community. The bridegroom's hands, which had previously beaten the bride, are transformed into loving hands. Thus, the performance ends with a verse, which, while emphasizing the equality between man and woman and the blessing that God bestows upon them both, subverts the patriarchal verses recited earlier.

In this case as well, the group preferred an optimistic ending that would dramatize the bride's dream on stage. This temporary manifestation of the bride's dream-wish for a sound family life and supportive community is a utopian performative moment illustrating the desired situation of communal solidarity.

In summary, the performance shapes a complex message regarding domestic violence in the Ethiopian community. On the one hand, the biblical references highlight the Jewish patriarchal order and its potential for violence as being deeply engrained within Jewish daily family life at large, and not as unique to Ethiopian Jewish life. On the other hand, the leitmotif of red and white, which is derived from the traditional Ethiopian wedding ceremony, simultaneously represents the desired harmony between the man and woman, and the destructive potential of the Ethiopian patriarchal structure. Epic theatre

techniques, such as the empty space, non-mimetic representations of violence, the chorus, and the mirror drama game, frame this phenomenon as social. These three elements shape the issue of domestic violence on stage as oscillating between a general Jewish phenomenon and its particularity within the Ethiopian community.

### ***Bam(a)agal [In the Circle] (2016)***

*In the Circle* (2016) deals with Ethiopian women's development from childhood to adulthood. In *Shimella, Shimella*, the focus is on the ethos of the heroic journey to Israel as a significance exodus, which is an important part of the Ethiopian Jewish identity as well as providing a national pride for this community. While in this performance the emphasis is on the feminine and the traumatic in the context of the immigration journey, in *In the Circle*, the formative communal ethos is 'privatized' by presenting female narratives of maturation in both Ethiopia and in Israel.

In line with the group's repertoire of performances focused on female experience, in this case, too, the theatrical language draws on different approaches to feminist-community theatre in Israel.<sup>26</sup> The performance takes place in a classroom at the Dora community centre in Netanya. Approximately fifteen audience members and seven female actors sit together in an intimate circle. The actors are wearing black dresses with white *natalas* (scarves) on their heads. A box containing different objects is placed under each of their chairs. An Ethiopian musician playing traditional wind instruments accompanies the performance.

This is an episodic performance, the narrative constructed around episodes framed as childhood games in which the audience participates. Drawing on such thinkers as Huizinga, Goffman, and Schechner, Lev-Aladgem views 'play' as a type of universal skill retained from childhood, which as such constitutes foundation and a point of departure for the amateur actor in community theatre.<sup>27</sup>

Through the 'play' approach, director Chen Elia forges a profound message. While the

games generate playfulness and are associated with the world of childhood, they are at the same time a metaphor for traumatic existential situations, such as keeping secrets, sexual harassment, and lacking a sense of home. The playing becomes a performance language through which the presentation of childhood playfulness elicits the painful irony of its metaphoric role as symbolizing maturation. Moreover, by having the audience participate in the event, it not only establishes a metatheatrical significance for the entire Ethiopian community. It also constitutes a utopian performative element, given that it renders both actors and spectators active agents in the arena of play. In this context, actors and spectators come to represent an empowered community capable of forging a better future within and for itself.

In the process of creating the performance, the actors shared their personal stories of multiple moves between homes in both Ethiopia and Israel, their sense of detachment, and their longing for a permanent home. In the performance, this mindset is dramatized in the form of a children's game. In this game, the actors sit in a circle, each with a box placed under their chair. The game begins by one actor removing a piece of chalk from their box. With the chalk, the actor draws lines, circles, mountains, and rivers on the floor within the circle, while acting as a storyteller, each telling her own story of wandering through villages and cities in both Ethiopia and Israel (Figure 7). When the first actor's virtual wandering leads her to another actor, the latter uses chalk from her own box to 'tell' her own story, while the former takes her place. The game continues until every actor has told her story. Breathing heavily to accentuate the arduousness of their journeys, the actors describe not only the hunger, thirst, fatigue, and constant prayers for salvation, but also moments of grace and of being enthralled by the wonders of places they had never seen before. When the journey ends with the arrival in Israel, the actors kneel in a circle and kiss the 'holy ground', shouting out in an exaggerated and humorous tone, 'The Land of Israel, the Land of Israel' (Figure 8). The ensuing communal narrative is not heroic,



**Figure 7.** *Bam(a)agal [In the Circle]*. Photographer: Chen Elia. Courtesy of Chen Elia.

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**Figure 8.** *Bam(a)agal [In the Circle]*. Photographer: Chen Elia. Courtesy of Chen Elia.

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but laden with Sisyphean twists and concentric bends. The immigration to Israel is presented as a parody, as the wandering continues between absorption centres<sup>28</sup> and rented apartments in the Promised Land.

The chalk markings render an undeciphered map of the community's story. Through this game, the inflation of locations echoes the experience of detachment. The lack of a home represents the lack of resources to purchase property as indicative of the link between the Ethiopian Jews' economic circumstances and their psychological state. The journey does not end, and the peace of mind associated with permanent residence is a goal more distant than ever.

In the 'Telephone Game', the players form a circle, and the first player whispers a message into the ear of the person next to them. The second player repeats the message to the third player, and so on. Eventually, the last player announces the message they heard to the entire group. In most cases, the retellings accumulate errors, so that the final announced message differs significantly from that of the first player, thereby causing a humorous effect. In this dramatized rendition of the game, the secret – 'You cannot talk about your menstrual period' – is known to both actors and spectators from the start. When it was communicated to the last actor she 'reveals' the secret by telling, still as if a secret evoking anxiety and shame, of the first time she menstruated. It happened at school. The girl does not know what to do, her clothes are soiled, and she is very ashamed. Her father buys her cotton wool and at one point she says, 'My mother told my older brother – why did she tell him? It is a secret; you're not allowed to talk about it!' Although generally considered a healthy and natural phenomenon signalling a young woman's sexuality and fertility, in the Ethiopian culture, menstruation is perceived as shameful, and therefore must be kept secret. Moreover, confidentiality is an important value in this community, and confidants are chosen for their ability to listen, advise, provide emotional support, and keep the secret. A violation of this taboo is problematic, even if the secret is a happy one, as

opposed to western culture in which the revealing of such a secret is considered permissible.<sup>29</sup>

Following another round of the 'Telephone Game', in which the secret is 'It is forbidden to tell if you have been touched', the players play 'Simon Says'. One actor performs the role of Simon, who instructs the others, by saying 'Simon says', to imitate the gesture they perform. Here the game functions as a means to criticize the women's obedience, on the one hand, and the sexual violence they suffer, on the other. Simon's directives become increasingly violent and silencing; for example: 'Simon says smile / Simon says be silent / Simon says be still / Simon says do not breathe.' Then they suggest sexual harassment: 'Simon says come closer, and feel / Simon says watch out / Simon says shut up / Simon says open your blouse / Simon says be still and lay down.' The instruction 'Do not breathe' is repeated again and again, in response to which the actors literally hold their breath. Keeping sexual harassment a secret becomes a spider's web, an intractable tangle. While the issue of sexual violence had been raised in previous plays, here it is not presented as an explicit autobiographical experience, but as innocent 'play' that hints at sexual harm. On the one hand, the game breaches the promise of keeping the secret and points to the need to talk about sexual vulnerability; on the other hand, its implicit nature still manages to highlight the shame that comes with its telling. This ambivalence reflects the complex situation in which Ethiopian women find themselves in relation to the value of keeping secrets within Ethiopian culture.

### *Elohim Lo Roeh Ba'Begadim [God Does Not See in Clothing] (2018)*

This performance grew out of the issues related to racism, stereotypes, and prejudice against Ethiopian Jews (Figure 9). Through the clothing and outfit motif, the issue of external appearance and racial profiling is emphasized, on the one hand, and on the other hand, this appearance indicates personal and





**Figure 9.** *Elohim lo Roeh Ba'Begadim* [God Does Not See in Clothing]. Photographer: Ronit Salomon. Courtesy of Ronit Salomon.

social identity. The tension between the desire to break free from society's racist gaze and the need to design an assertive and empowering identity is at the centre of the performance.

As previously mentioned, the focus of this performance is on costumes and clothing. In semiotic terms, the costume symbolizes aspects of the character, such as status, personality, age, aesthetic taste, and body. Here, the costume functions as a metaphor for the tension between an individual's roles and identities – between the sense of collective belonging and the individual's limitations. The costume is also a component of the racist and patriarchal gaze which is directed at dark-skinned women and frames them as stereotypes. From this perspective, the audience's gaze, which is directed at the stage, becomes an object of criticism itself.

A semicircle of black chairs is arranged on stage. Above it there is a screen upon which captions are projected. The captions deal with aspects of the female-Ethiopian experience represented in the form of costumes or articles of clothing; for example: 'Straitjacket', 'Disguise', 'Empty Suit', 'Scarf', and 'God Does Not See in Clothing'. In Elin Diamond's terms, the acting mode is epic-feminist, given that most of the scenes function as a type of story theatre.<sup>30</sup> A female actor shares her experiences with the audience, juxtaposed with other actors illustratively enacting characters in the story. The rapid alternating between

characters highlights the actors as human beings beyond their roles and identities in the performance.

In the opening scene, the actors are positioned stage-front, holding various articles of clothing: a wedding dress, a policeman's uniform, a traditional white Ethiopian dress, and shirts. The caption 'Roles on Hangers' suggests that the articles of clothing signify roles, identities, and stations in life. The actors direct a piercing gaze at the audience and, in turn, ask a series of defiant questions: 'I know what you think of me / You think you know me / You've probably already decided where I come from? / Sure, you've decided . . .' The statements gradually become more scathing: 'You did not stop to ask me – who am I? / And you did not see underneath / You did not ask what hurts / And you did not see scars / Or what are my heart's desires.' They end in a scornful statement: 'In fact, you know nothing / You know only yourselves.' The actors criticize the audience's gaze, which reduces them to the clothing they wear – in this case, the gaze involves stereotyping dark-skinned woman as inferior. By way of this counter-gaze, the performers not only call attention to the gap between who they are and what they wear, but stress that their personalities are far more complex, extending beyond any one category of status, gender, or race.

At the beginning of the performance, the actors are wearing layers of clothing, which they gradually remove during the course of the play, until they expose the final garment, a uniform black dress. This colour is both neutral and symbolic of skin colour, suggesting that even that which is theatrically neutral cannot liberate them from the cultural perception of their skin, particularly as a racializing signifier in an oppressive white society. At the end of the performance, the actors dress themselves again in the discarded clothes while the song 'Lifshot Shehavot' ('Remove Layers') plays in the background. The lyrics of this song point to the notion of removing clothing as conditionally indicative of the discarding of identity: 'If I discard my name / my family name / my home / my loved ones . . . / my skin / Then I'll be cold.' Nudity represents

absence, self-annihilation, and the inability to function in the world. While in the opening scene, the clothing signifies the restricted and stereotyped predicament of dark-skinned women, in this final scene, the clothing represents the women's desire for an acceptable identity as a source of support and warmth without which they 'will be cold'. This is a utopian performative ending in which the dark-skinned woman can alternate between concealing and revealing as a way to avoid the extreme circumstance of nudity and lack, on the one hand, and disguise, falsity, and stereotyping, on the other.

In this scene, the caption reads 'The Mountain of Laundry'. On stage is a pile of laundry which the performers are separating – white, black, coloured. Emulating a typical domestic scenario, each actor in their turn proposes what they believe to be the most effective way to wash clothing (Figure 10). The conversation is both literal and metaphorical. Laundering is a female chore, one with which the

performers are familiar from their own everyday lives, and thus functions as a metonym for the Sisyphean, mundane work of caring for the household and raising children. Metaphorically, it carries the meaning of their difficult human existence as dark-skinned women. The laundering also enables the surfacing, if only glimpsed, of personal accounts, including the public disclosure of 'dirty laundry' – i.e., secrets and difficult experiences. Separating the laundry into white and black and what is in between is a metaphor for the issue of the racism from which dark-skinned women suffer. The act of laundering is also a metaphor for devising, in the sense that a myriad of experiences was loaded into a washing machine and now, after being cleansed, edited, and put in order, are displayed/performed. It is only after they have been carefully selected and organized, like clean and folded laundry, that these experiences and the pain they convey become palatable for the audience.



**Figure 10.** *Elohim Lo Roeh Ba'Begadim* [God Does Not See in Clothing]. Photographer: Ronit Salomon. Courtesy of Ronit Salomon.

'Straitjacket' and 'The Disguise' are scenes addressing male violence against women, a key theme in the group's repertoire. In the first of these scenes, a wife talks about how her husband claims she is insane and gaslights her. Policewomen and nurses take part in her involuntary hospitalization. Dressed in a straitjacket, she acts out and talks about how her husband cut all of her clothing in order to leave her naked, both physically and mentally. Nevertheless, she manages to escape him, declaring at the end: 'Take this jacket of yours and put it on him.'

In contrast, 'The Disguise' describes a woman who conceals her husband's violence. She disguises herself in accordance with social expectations: 'Today I will dress up as a happy woman / Today I'll wear the "everything's fine" mask / And the best armour of them all – the fake smile / With this disguise, which has almost become my second skin / No one asks questions / Everybody's happy / This disguise can be replaced with one thing only – shrouds.' The beaten woman's strategy of concealment culminates in her death. While the straitjacket represents violence and the woman's exclusion from the sane, the disguise is a means to fake sanity, which ultimately leads to her death.

Towards the performance's ending, a girl, who appears satisfied and excited, enters wearing a wrinkled, worn-out paper dress. The others on stage ridicule and scorn her. The girl tells them how her father reacted to seeing her in this dress: 'My daughter, God does not see in clothing' – in other words, what one sees externally has no true significance. God sees what is invisible, not clothing or the colour of one's skin. This is a utopian performative moment of life from God's vantage point, which does not exist in the social reality. The desire to be a human being liberated from the categorizing gaze and to live beyond identities is only possible temporarily on stage. In the theatrical event, it is possible to change identities and declare that none of them are in fact 'I'. At the same time, as mentioned, the song that ends the performance describes the woman's undressing completely as a

problem. Ultimately, clothing as identity is necessary as part of the desire for human warmth and solidarity. Thus, the performance straddles the seam (of the clothing) between the desire to be free of restraining attire and the knowledge that it nevertheless is a vehicle of individual meaning.

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