

LIFELINE

NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY

FALL 2007

In Ethiopia: Miracles in the Making

First Miracle:

A few weeks ago, we asked your help in fighting for the lives of our children at the height of the malaria season in Ethiopia.

We told you that our best hope of preventing young children from dying from this awful disease is to feed them well enough so that, even if they get malaria, their immune systems can often fight it off. But inflation and food shortages were making it hard for us to provide all the food they needed.

We asked for help — and you came through for us!!

People called and wrote, saying they wanted to contribute to “the malaria fund”. The money you sent enabled us to feed the children well (and the pregnant and nursing mothers, also at high risk) even though inflation drove food prices up.

If we hadn’t had your swift, generous response, we would have had to curtail what we could buy just when good nutrition was so desperately needed.

Let me give you just one small example of what we faced.

Getu Zemene, the leader of the community in Gondar, sent us a frantic email to say that the cost of a bread roll had just risen dramatically.

Could he still go ahead and buy the bread for the Feeding Center and the School lunches, especially considering that everything else had gone up too?

We were going way over our budget, but the bottom line is that bread provides not only nourishment but



INSIDE:

**NACOEJ
AT 25 YEARS
1982-2007**

calories. And our children urgently need the calories.

So, because of your generosity, we were able to tell Getu, “Go ahead and buy the rolls!”

What are the results so far? Miraculous.

Getu says that there are fewer malaria cases in the community this year, and those that have occurred are less severe than we dared to hope. There has not been even one death from malaria in the community so far.

The malaria season is not over – it lasts all year – but in the worst of it our community is coming through with flying colors. **Thank you for your gifts of life.**

Second Miracle:

I’m sure you remember that a few months ago we had to tell you that our rundown, overcrowded, under-supplied Beta Israel school had been shut down by the government, and that many of our children had nowhere to go.

Now, that is changing too.

We have started improving the Beta Israel school, and the community has been given permission to re-open it!

And the Ethiopian government has given NACOEJ a piece of land on which to establish a new school.

Some of the start-up costs are being covered by a generous grant from the United Jewish Communities (UJC).

We have to raise the rest of the funds of course — **but it’s a miracle in the making.**

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Miracles CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Neither the new school nor the old one will look like the schools to which children in your community go. They will still be rows of one-story classrooms, simple and modest — BUT THE CLASSROOMS WILL HAVE REAL FLOORS, REAL WALLS, REAL DESKS AND REAL BOOKS.

With your help, we'll have a science room. A playing field (did we ever tell you that the Jewish children of Gondar have organized themselves into two soccer teams?). A computer lab. Simple things for us – miracles for our children in Gondar.

We couldn't start building the new school without the grant the UJC and some of the most generous federations are giving us. **But we won't be able to finish the new school and the community won't be able to use the old one without your help.**

The miracle of the schools will be achieved only by the miracle of our NACOEJ supporters, all of you who make it all possible.

Because it has been your kindness and compassion and generosity that have made every NACOEJ miracle in the past 25 years possible.

Now we have the possibility that the children can learn better than ever before. And when they go to Israel – as they will – they will be better prepared than any immigrant Ethiopian children have ever been.

There are many ways – including some special ones – you can help the children learn.

Please see the enclosed card.

Together, we can go on making miracles! ■

QUESTION AND ANSWER

Q Are Ethiopian children in Israel segregated into separate classes in their public schools? Do they learn in Amharic or Hebrew? How about in our *Limudiah*?

A It used to be quite common for newly arrived Ethiopian children to be placed in special classes until they had learned enough Hebrew, or caught up sufficiently on basic school skills, to be integrated into grades that were reasonably age-appropriate.

Today, every effort is made to integrate newly arrived children as fast as possible in public schools, and of course, Ethiopian children who were born in Israel, or arrived as babies, are not separated out. All the children learn in Hebrew. Amharic is now offered as an optional third language in some high schools. (English is the second language in Israel.)

NACOEJ after-school programs are specifically created for Ethiopian children, as their special circumstances require. But the great success of the NACOEJ *Limudiah* has brought an unexpected number of parents from non-Ethiopian families to us, asking that their children be allowed to join.

We believe integration is a good thing, and when we can afford it, we are happy to integrate our classes. At this point, when our budget is stretched past its limits, we must require non-Ethiopian participants to fund their own lunches, and of course, we must ensure that our classes don't become larger than eight children to one teacher.

CONGRATULATIONS TO...

- **Middie Giesberg**, former NACOEJ Chairperson, and **Dick Giesberg**, former NACOEJ President, on being honored by their alma mater, the University of Maine.

The Giesbergs were awarded Doctorates of Humane Letters for their years of outstanding humanitarian service on behalf of many communities in Los Angeles, America and the world.

"But when the University president, Robert Kennedy, spoke about us," Dick says, "he emphasized Ethiopian Jewry above all else. We were very proud of the part we have played in NACOEJ's work in both Ethiopia and Israel."

- An additional Mazel Tov to Middie and Dick Giesberg on the Bar Mitzvah of their grandson, Joshua Lappen, a long-time young NACOEJ volunteer. Congratulations to Josh's parents, Susan Giesberg and David Lappen, and brother Michael.



NACOEJ AT 25 YEARS 1982-2007

NACOEJ IN ETHIOPIA



Late in 1981, the first American Jewish mission to Ethiopian Jews, sponsored by the Los Angeles Jewish Federation, landed in Gondar. In early 1982, NACOEJ was formed in New York. Five mission participants are still NACOEJ Board members.



Mission members rode mules and horses, hiked, and slept on the ground to reach a remote Jewish village in the mountains.

THE FIRST MISSION



Ten years later, NACOEJ staff helped Operation Solomon fly over 14,000 Jews to Israel.



ABOVE: An embroidery co-op, funded by NACOEJ, gave work to thousands left behind.



LEFT: Schools and lunch programs were opened for the children.

NACOEJ IN ETHIOPIA cont.

RIGHT:
Today,
monthly food
distributions
to Jews in
Gondar enable
families to
survive.



A Feeding Center serves nutritious twice-daily meals to thousands of young children, pregnant and nursing mothers.



ABOVE:
Joyful processions
greet donated
Torahs, carried to
Ethiopia by NACOEJ
missions. Flags of
Ethiopia, Israel and
the United States
are displayed.

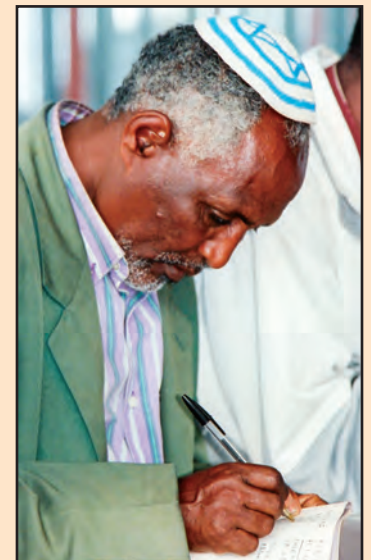


Children eating in the Center grow healthier, taller and stronger.

RIGHT:
Tiny synagogues
in Beta Israel
compounds grew
into big spaces
for worship, work
and learning.



A compound nurse checks all children regularly.



Adult education teaches literate and illiterate men and women.

FROM ETHIOPIA TO ISRAEL FROM WASIHUN TO MOSHE

Moshe Wonde, at right, is a graduate of Bar-Ilan University, which he attended with a NACOEJ sponsorship.

In 1984, when a NACOEJ mission found him in an isolated Jewish village, he was a severely crippled child called Wasihun.

We arranged his exit to Israel, where he found medical care, *sabra* friends, a new name and a new life.



NACOEJ IN ISRAEL



New arrivals joyfully greet family in Israel.



Torahs come to Ethiopian-Israeli synagogues via NACOEJ. The one above, in BeerSheva, was the first.



NACOEJ runs after-school education for Ethiopian children in 20 schools in seven Israeli cities.

NACOEJ IN ISRAEL CONT.



In the 1980's, NACOEJ funded continuing education and vocational training for immigrant girls.



TV helps immigrants learn Hebrew.



ABOVE: NACOEJ pre-school program after Operation Solomon.



Leadership training at Leo Baeck is funded by NACOEJ.



LEFT: Summer school/camp offers fun and learning.

BELOW: A college student meets her NACOEJ sponsor.



ABOVE: Kids need school lunches in Israel too.



Ethiopians excel in the IDF.



LEFT: NACOEJ sponsors high school students in Israel.

RIGHT: Natan Sendeke (center) heroically stopped a terrorist.



LEFT: We spent time in bomb shelters with Ethiopian Jews during the Second Lebanon war.

In Israel: More Miracles in the Making...

What struck me first were their smiles, and then the deep sincerity in their eyes.

We were on a family trip to Israel to visit my husband's two daughters and their families. I took advantage of being there to meet Yehudit Abramson of the NACOEJ Israel office when she went to Bar-Ilan University to distribute checks to college students who are part of the NACOEJ/Vidal Sassoon Adopt-A-Student program. Bar-Ilan is one of the universities all over Israel where we have AAS students.

At first the students were a bit shy. The language problem loomed large. My Hebrew is not sufficient to carry out an interview. And the students always think their English is not good enough, although more often than not it is.

But we managed, and over the next two hours, we had a line forming to be interviewed.

Everyone wanted a chance to express their deep gratitude for the AAS program and for their sponsors. Since, in almost all cases, their English was better than they thought, we were highly successful in the communication department.

What came across unequivocally was, to a person, they could not successfully attend and graduate from university without the partnership, love and support of their sponsors. Their gratitude shone in their eyes, echoed in their words, showed in their smiles.

The AAS program is, without a shadow of a doubt, changing the lives of these young people.

Like Meirav Elazar, who is working on a doctorate in biology.

Meirav came to Israel during Operation Moses in 1984 and has been at Bar-Ilan University since she began college. Her sponsors are wonderful, she said. They write letters back and forth and they always know how she's doing.

"They are very encouraging," she said, "very supportive and helpful with their kindness."

Zawuaitu Mekonen came to Israel in 1989 at the age of five, with her grandparents, sister and brother. Her mother died on the road to Sudan and her father stayed in Sudan to help others coming from their villages to this transit point.

She is now a third-year student, working on a degree in psychology and Jewish philosophy.



Meirav and Caroline

Zawuaitu knows her father's resources are limited and she has a job in the cafeteria to help out. It is still not enough, and her sponsor, to whom she is deeply, deeply grateful, makes up the difference that enables her to stay in university.

Samyan Fiseha came to Israel in 1990 with his whole family. He has two more years to go to receive his bachelor's degree in political science.

The support of his sponsor, he said, enables him to travel to see his family, and buy food and books. It makes all the difference, and his appreciation shows in the smile on his face when he talks about his sponsor.

What comes through clearly when you talk to these students is their genuine appreciation, their respect for their sponsors, and their desire to establish relationships with these generous people who are having such a profound impact on their lives.

Caroline Barg
NACOEJ Director of Communications

For information about becoming a sponsor, please contact Evelyn Deitchman at 212-233-5200, Ext. 226.

CONDOLENCES TO...

- The family, students and community of **Rabbi Avraham Elkana Shapira, zt"l**, Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel from 1983 to 1993. Considered by many to be a "spiritual giant of religious Zionism", Rabbi Shapira was often controversial, but is remembered by Ethiopian Jews as the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi to recognize them as part of the Jewish people. (Sephardic Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef was the first to accept them.) Rabbi Shapira was 94.
- **Joseph Feit**, past President of NACOEJ and current Board member, his wife Surella, and the entire Feit family on the loss of Joseph's beloved mother. Hattie Feit was a great lady, a beloved mother, grandmother and great-grandmother, and an active member of many national and local Jewish organizations throughout her life.
- NACOEJ Board member **Evely Laser Shlensky** on the loss of her beloved father, Leonard (Arye Lev) Laser. Our hearts go out to Evely and her family, who have suffered two great losses in a short time.



Protected from the Jerusalem morning sun by traditional parasols, *Kesotch* chant the beautiful Sigd liturgy while fasting with the community.



Robed in white, Ethiopian-Israeli women hold their hands out prayerfully at the Sigd in Jerusalem. All will break their fast when Sigd ends in the afternoon.

At the Sigd...

Last year, about six weeks before the Sigd, a number of Ethiopian community organizations, youth movements and educational groups gathered together to discuss what could be done to make the occasion more meaningful for the Ethiopian-Israeli youth who come, but are not really part of it.

Many are brought by boarding schools, others come with their parents, are happy to meet friends, but have no connection to the religious aspects of this unique Ethiopian Jewish holiday. Even though some schools give lessons about the significance of Sigd, the event itself has elements that are difficult for the youth to relate to. This is especially true of the main element, the many prayers sung by the *Kesotch* (priests) in *Ge'ez* (ancient Ethiopic), which in modern times is no longer spoken but is the language of religious texts and prayers.

A number of those participating in the meeting, which was called by the Israel Association for Ethiopian Jews, with which NACOEJ works closely, offered to set up tents or activity centers on the Jerusalem Promenade, near the stage upon which the *Kesotch* stood praying.

Each activity was designed to draw youth and others. Shoshana Ben-Dor, our educational director in Israel, who has made an extensive study of the liturgy of Beta Israel in *Ge'ez*, agreed to set up a NACOEJ tent where she would teach a number of the prayers, using both transliterations of the texts and translations.

"I knew that very few members of the community understand *Ge'ez*,



In a traditional Ethiopian dress, Shoshana Ben-Dor explains the liturgy at Sigd. Ethiopian-Israelis regard Shoshana as one of their community.

and as I believe in the importance of the event as a religious holiday, it is important to me that the community understands the meaning of the prayers."

With the help of Kassahun Wendie, NACOEJ-Israel Outreach Director, Shoshana set up her tent on the day of Sigd, with copies of the prayers (as well as informational booklets about NACOEJ), and taught individuals and groups.

"I started at 11:30 and kept going until about 2:30. I believe I gave five rounds of teaching, both prayers and information about the religious life of the Ethiopian Jewish community in Ethiopia." Not only Ethiopian youngsters learned with her, so did young leaders of the community, college students, soldiers and others working with the community, as well as journalists and visitors.

The Sigd is held 50 days after Yom Kippur, and is based on the covenant renewal event described in the book of Nehemiah, carried out soon after the return to Zion of the Babylonian exiles.

The day consists of an elaborate prayer service, Torah readings about the giving of the Ten Commandments and other sections, as well as chapter nine of Nehemiah, and a number of other rituals tied to the day. "Before the Sigd is turned into a festival devoid of its traditional religious significance, it is important for the community to get to know its traditional content," Shoshana says.

"The only thing I am sorry about, is that I spent the whole day teaching and never really got to the Sigd."

Editorial note: This year, the Sigd took place on November 8th. Shoshana taught again. ■