

LIFELINE

NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY

SPRING 2009

A Few Days Ago I Sent an E-mail to Getu...

A few days ago, I sent an e-mail to Getu Zemene, the wonderful Beta Israel man who manages our programs in Ethiopia. (I say I sent it, which really means I wrote it and someone else e-mailed it for me. I still use a typewriter because I'm very inarticulate on a computer.)

What I asked Getu was to send me an e-mail (he does e-mail very well!) about the general conditions in the community of 8700 Jews Israel has still not checked for eligibility for aliyah.

I asked a bunch of questions that were worrying me most. Getu, as usual, replied immediately. But there was something unusual about the reply.

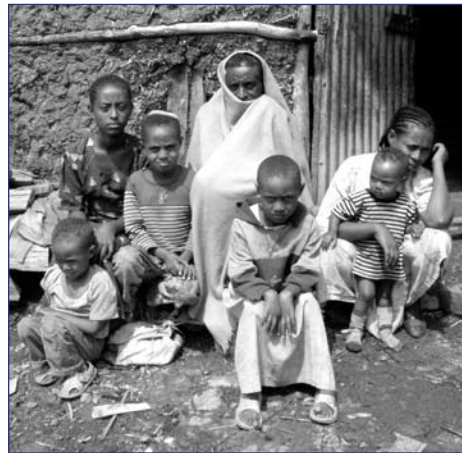
Getu's responses to questions are always factual. His English isn't perfect, but way better than my Amharic, which is non-existent. The tone in which he writes is sometimes very proud (when he has good news to report), sometimes anxious (when trouble is looming or upon us) – but this was different.

This time what came across was despair.

Getu is – with no exaggeration – the bravest man I know. He has faced physical, social, and legal attacks because of his work for the Beta Israel. He has been arrested (always released because the charges were never true), he has had a gun put to his head. His home has been assaulted, his reputation attacked, his life threatened more times than I can count.

And Getu has always courageously faced down these threats. But this is the first time I have heard him sound desperate.

Not for himself. Not even for his family. But for the community he serves.



Here is what Getu Replied:

To Barbara at NACOEJ:

In answer – The BIGGEST PROBLEM in the community is HUNGER right now!!!!

There are many health problems if someone doesn't get food. We can see big difference between kids getting our school lunches and those not getting. Kids getting look healthier. There are 920 in the school but not all can come all the time. There are some children kept out of school to shine shoes and to work as a daily

laborer. There are some girls working as maids in peoples' homes in Gondar City.

About malaria: 500 families got the mosquito nets. We have given the nets for those who have got many kids. (Note from Barbara: two very special Bar Mitzvah boys donated and raised money for mosquito nets for Gondar.) Some people still get malaria but not so exaggerated. Thank you.

Some people who have got close relatives in Israel gets money from them. Most men and women who can find any jobs are working in the construction field as being daily laborer.

CONDITIONS ARE VERY BAD. PLEASE COME HERE AND BE SEEN FOR THE PEOPLE AND TALK TO THEM IN SUCH BAD CONDITIONS.

With great respecting,
Getu

From Barbara:

I have never known Getu to use exclamation marks, or to demand so strongly that we come to Ethiopia and see for ourselves. I think we must go. We must bring hope and whatever help we can, in person.

We will schedule a mission to Gondar and Israel in May. We have enclosed information. The community needs us. Please help. Please come with us.

"Let all who are hungry, come and eat!"

Enclosed with this newsletter is a wonderful description of last year's matzah-making in Gondar. This year, will we have enough funds for grain to carry the community

through Passover and the weeks that follow? In a year when the community's most desperate problem is hunger, will the Jewish families of Gondar be able

to exclaim, with a shout of joy, the great Passover invitation: **"Let all who are hungry, come and eat!"** It's up to us.

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Yes, Now We Have Some Bananas...

Thanks to you wonderful, wonderful, incredible people, we now have enough money to give the children in the NACOEJ Beta Israel Community elementary school bananas again – at least once a week.

We're starting out slow, keeping a wary eye on inflation, which has affected everything on the school lunch menu so dreadfully for the last year. I recently saw a report on Ethiopia that said a good crop was now coming in. Could it possibly, eventually, bring food prices down? That would be a blessing indeed.

Meanwhile, how can I express how moved all of us at NACOEJ are when we open envelopes and take out checks that come with a note saying, "My wife and I have both lost our jobs, but the Ethiopian Jews are much worse off..." – or "I have had to give up other charities, but I will continue to support NACOEJ as long as I can."

Tribute to a Hero

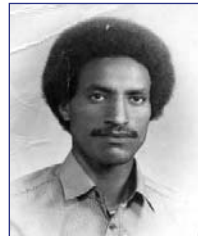
BY SHOSHANA BEN-DOR,
DIRECTOR NACOEJ-ISRAEL

One of the privileges of working with the Ethiopian Jewish community over the last 30 years has been the possibility of meeting real heroes. One such hero, Ferede Akum, died last January at the age of 62.

Without Ferede, the aliyah of Ethiopian Jews by way of Sudan might never have taken place or would certainly have been long delayed.

During a period when Ethiopia had a cruel Communist government and no one was allowed to leave, Ferede was the principal of two Jewish schools established by ORT. Most of the Jewish teachers in the ORT schools were arrested and tortured. Ferede escaped to Sudan, suffering hunger and privation, but he established the path to Israel.

It was Ferede who, upon reaching Sudan in 1979, was able to contact the Israeli Mossad, was asked by Israel to remain in Sudan, and at great personal risk and sacrifice, spent the next



several years locating Jews who had reached Sudan and organizing them for aliyah. Immediately after the response from the Mossad, Ferede wrote to his family, who thought him dead, and asked two of his brothers to join him in this dangerous, life-saving work with the Mossad.

Ferede's actions opened the way for thousands of Ethiopian Jews to leave Ethiopia in secret, make their way to Sudan and then reach Israel. Despite extreme personal danger, Ferede remained in Sudan until the mid-eighties, helping his brethren reach Israel.

I met Ferede for the first time in about 1981, on his first vacation in Israel, taking a break from his efforts in Sudan. He was staying with his family in an absorption center. He was a gentle but intense man, totally dedicated to what he was doing for his community.

Upon settling for good in Israel, along with his growing family, Ferede continued to serve his community

My heart breaks for all the worthy causes that are suffering this year. I too am making hard choices, and trying to base my decisions on whether some excellent charities have a broader base of support than others.

In the case of NACOEJ, you, our NACOEJ family, are our base, and have been ever since we opened our doors (actually my living room door) back in 1982.

Thank heavens, our NACOEJ family still does include some federations, some foundations, some organizations for whose generosity we are always tremendously grateful, but without the loyalty of individuals, families, synagogues and schools, we could never have started, and certainly could not continue, to help the most ancient, least known, and usually most vulnerable Jews in the world.

I have no way to say thank you except to say it. Thank you with all my heart. Come to Ethiopia with us in May, and hear it from a thousand Jewish children. You will feel as blessed as they do.

Barbara

tirelessly. As the anthropological advisor to one of his projects, I again met Ferede, still intense and dedicated, still thin and aged beyond his years. We exchanged memories of "the old days".

According to his brother Amram, Ferede always carried with him not only satisfaction for what he accomplished, but also memories of the horrors of the refugee camps in Sudan and the painful knowledge that the path to Israel by way of Sudan led through much suffering and many deaths.

In his last six years, Ferede returned to Ethiopia, which now has a democratic government, not to live, but as a partner in an agricultural project there. Life came full circle in that he left Ethiopia a wanted Jew, and returned as an Ethiopian-Israeli businessman, able to invest in the country of his birth. May his memory be both a blessing and a source of inspiration.

Editor's Note: Among Ferede's 11 siblings and eight children, two brothers, Amram and Naftali, have received NACOEJ/Vidal Sassoon Adopt-A-Student scholarships, and so far one son, Meir, has also.

War (and Peace?): A Story from Gedera

During the Gaza War, everyone heard about Sderot, the Israeli town which was (and had been for years) a prime target of Hamas missiles. But even at the height of the crisis, only a few Americans heard about Gedera, a nearby small town with a largely middle-class population – and a growing Ethiopian community.

At NACOEJ, we knew about Gedera because we had 95 Ethiopian-Israeli children in our *Limudiah* classes there. That is, we had them until the missiles started falling too heavily and the schools closed. Our *Limudiah* after-school education classes, which took place in the schools, had to close, too.

If you read a recent letter from NACOEJ, you know that we were very concerned not only about the safety, but also about the education, of our Ethiopian children in Gedera.

Daily lessons were being sent over the internet to school children in Gedera, but very few of the Ethiopian children had access to the internet. They were falling further and further behind every day.

So we decided that if the children couldn't come to *Limudiah*, we would find a way to make the *Limudiah* come to them. Our small Jerusalem staff worked it all out. In a few days, *Limudiah* teachers began arriving at buildings where Ethiopian families were willing to let their small apartments serve as classrooms. For security reasons, the municipality allowed only five children and a teacher to come together at a time of danger, but we always have small classes in *Limudiah*.

It wasn't easy -- teachers risked their safety traveling to different locations, some homes were naturally more crowded and noisier than an ideal classroom, some older or younger children of the households were distracting -- but none of that mattered.

The little groups of *Limudiah* children eagerly went to work on reading and discussing stories (especially those that related to their situation), getting homework done, drawing pictures and acting out skits that not only improved their school skills, but helped them deal with their feelings of fear and confusion.

We had a wonderful break when a group of American rabbis who were going to Israel agreed to take an emergency delivery of school supplies for Gedera. They not only took what we had in the NACOEJ office in New York, they collected more in their own congregations. The cease-fire started just before the supplies got to Gedera, but the children were thrilled to get them in their re-opened classrooms.

As we write, the cease-fire seems to be in danger of breaking down, as more Hamas missiles have been fired at Israeli towns, and Israel is responding. Whatever happens next, we will continue to do our best for the children who are in our care. ■

**Photos top to bottom:
U.S. children collecting school supplies;
Rabbis delivering supplies in Israel;
a class in an apartment;
in classes in a reopened school, children
open a duffel bag of new supplies
and read a letter from the donors.**



A Twelve-Year-Old Champion Needs a Pair of Shoes

You won't believe this little girl.

Her name is Tigist Bitau, and she's in fifth grade in Ness Ziona. She's also in the NACOEJ *Limudiah* after-school education program there, where we knew her as a very nice child, polite, friendly, a bit shy, an average student who likes to exercise by running.

Running pretty fast, it turns out.

Tigist recently entered a 2500 meter race. Somebody goofed, and put her into the 16-year-old contest. Tigist is 12. She was too shy to complain, so she just ran, and came in first.

The story made headlines in the local papers. Suddenly Tigist was a hero. Her grades went up, and her social life blossomed. She thinks it's because winning makes her feel "stronger

and more confident", and getting famous makes "everybody want to be my friend".

Tigist is on a regular training schedule now, and she's very happy with it, but she's got a problem. Her feet hurt. She's outgrown her shoes, and her family can't afford to buy her a new pair of proper running shoes.

Would someone like to make a special gift so we can buy Tigist new running shoes?

L'Dor V'Dor – From Generation to Generation

The Hebrew phrase – *l'dor v'dor* – means from generation to generation, but it's often used to mean "forever". At NACOEJ, we are now seeing second generations in our own programs – with education, good jobs, self-sufficiency, made possible in our programs, being passed along from parents to children. We expect this legacy of success to go on "forever".

We see even more rapid transfers of high expectations when older students in our programs are mindful of their younger siblings.

Here are two terrific examples:

In the photo below, NACOEJ Israel Director Shoshana Ben-Dor is delightedly bending over first-grader Lidor Getahun (at right), in our *Limudiah* class in the Horev School in Ramla. Lidor's mother, Esther, and some of her siblings were in our *Limudiah* in the same school, in the 1990's.

As you can guess from looking at Lidor, nicely dressed, glowing with health, the family is thriving. Esther not only holds a job at the city social service department, but is continuing her education in night school. Her husband is also gainfully employed and the family has its own home and car. *L'Dor V'Dor*...

Then there is the Wendam family. Daughter Israela, who studies in a prestigious nursing academy in Sfat, is sponsored by Evelyn Axelrod through the NACOEJ/Vidal Sassoon Adopt-A-Student program.

In one of her letters to Evelyn, Israela talked about her younger brother Nimrod and sister Hadas, and how their high school studies were affected by the fact that their father, who had worked for the Polgat plant in Kiryat Gat for 15 years, had just been laid off, uncompensated, when the plant closed.



Shoshana Ben-Dor with first-grader Lidor Getahun (at right), in our *Limudiah* class in the Horev School in Ramla.

The mother of the family has a job as a cleaning lady, but her income can hardly cover rent and food for the family, much less the special fees high school students have to pay for books, carfare, educational school trips, and much more.

Evelyn immediately decided to sponsor Nimrod and Hadas as well, enabling them to continue their high school education in good local schools.

Now a caring older sibling and promising younger ones can all hope to progress toward good educations, good jobs, good lives – *L'Dor V'Dor*...

We have literally hundreds of other terrific young students – in high school and college – on our waiting lists for the help that will enable them to break the cycle of poverty affecting the Ethiopian-Israeli immigrant community, and pass along to the next generation a legacy of pride, success and self-sufficiency.

Here are two students who urgently need sponsors:



COLLEGE
Darbabauw Gete
LAW, UNIVERSITY OF HAIFA

I was born in a village called Ambober in the province of Gondar, Ethiopia. I first came to Israel together with my parents and my seven siblings in 1991.

When we first arrived here we were given a place to stay in a Jewish Agency absorption center in Mevaseret Zion, near Jerusalem.

Getting used to life in Israel was relatively easy for me, since I was only five years old when we came. I remember being very excited with all the new things I saw here that I had never seen before.

My parents had a much harder time learning a new language and assimilating the modern Israeli culture. Indeed things here are very different from what my parents knew in Ethiopia and because my father is 82 years old and my mother 72, they never really learnt the language properly and have always had an easier time speaking Amharic.

After completing my high school studies with good grades, I joined the military where I served in armaments for three years.

This year I have begun my first year of academic studies at the University of Haifa. This year is

most difficult and intensive academically and my schedule is very busy.

I hope that you will be able to assist me so I can focus all my efforts on my studies instead of worrying about financial difficulties.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Editor's Note: Once the chief Jewish village in Gondar Province, Ambober has always produced leaders, both in Ethiopia and Israel. Darbabauw wants to be a lawyer – a profession in which young Ethiopian-Israelis can make a real difference, ably representing their community in the courts and in dealing with authorities. Will someone give Darbabauw from Ambober a chance to help his people?



HIGH SCHOOL
Avraham Rada
11TH GRADE,
BEN-GURION HIGH SCHOOL,
NESS ZIONA

Shalom! My name is Avraham, and I have lived most of my life in Ness Ziona with my loving family. I want to devote myself to my studies and to graduate with honors, so that I can help my parents and my family that love me so much and sacrificed themselves so that I could have a better education and a better life.

We are seven in our family (including me) – my father is unemployed, my mother works as a cleaner in a company that organizes conferences, my siblings all work – Keren in a fruit factory, Simcha in the "Hot" TV Cable Company, Mengistu

in a kiosk, and I don't remember what Moshe does.

My family came to Israel in 1992. They used to live in Ethiopia with all their uncles and cousins around them. They all decided to leave Ethiopia and to come to Jerusalem, which was their dream.

This was very hard – because so many families wanted to come to Jerusalem, there was not enough room in the airplane, and when there was finally room, they had to walk 12 days in difficult conditions: heat, lack of food, mountain climbing, having to care of many children, and the fact that I was born on the way!

My hobbies are playing soccer with my friends and watching television. My favorite school subjects are – Bible, language, physics and mathematics.

When I grow up I wish to be an important and respected person. I hope to be able to give my parents and my family the best that I can, so that they will have a better life. To achieve these goals I have to work hard in school.

Editor's Note: Wow! Would someone like to write to this great kid and help him become the "important and respected person" he wants to become?

For more information on adopting a high school or college student, please contact Judy Dick at 212-233-5200, ext. 230 or at college@nacoj.org.

Thanks for the Tefillin

Many NACOEJ supporters have responded to our recent plea for used tefillin to be made kosher again in Israel and passed along to Ethiopian Jews there and in Gondar.

Some people have collected numerous pairs from synagogues and neighbors. Others have sent a family heirloom, with touching notes about the father or grandfather who once treasured this important religious article.

Please keep the tefillin coming. It is a great mitzvah to enable those who cannot afford to buy tefillin to receive a pair they can use, and treasure in their turn.

Condolences to...

- British Friends of NACOEJ founder and trustee **Myer Daniels** on the loss of his beloved mother, Rebecca Daniels of Dublin. Our deepest sympathies also go to Myer's wife Mavis, and sons, Mark and Michael, and daughters-in-law, Sonia and Tamar.
- NACOEJ Treasurer **Tzvi Bar-Shai** on the loss of his beloved mother, Henia Schieber. Our deepest sympathies also go to Tzvi's wife, Etty, and to their children, daughter Inbal and sons Assaf and Elahd.



Alemenew's Engagement Party

BY NACOEJ BOARD MEMBER AND PAST PRESIDENT KEN KAISERMAN

Thanks to NACOEJ and the NACOEJ/Vidal Sassoon Adopt-A-Student (AAS) Program, I've been able to sponsor and nurture a connection with Alemenew Tesema, an Ethiopian-Israeli.

Alemenew is an extraordinary young man who has seized the opportunities that Israel has to offer and made the most of them. As a computer science student at Bar-Ilan University, as an officer in an elite IDF division, as a warm and caring individual, he always excels.

Last year when I visited Israel, he called me to take me out to dinner. Naturally I wanted to

treat, but he wouldn't hear of it. He wanted me to meet his girlfriend. And so he took me to an Ethiopian restaurant near my hotel in Tel Aviv, where I made the acquaintance of Bosse, a charming young woman who is a law student, also at Bar-Ilan University.

So in 2008 it came as no surprise to receive an invitation to Bosse and Alemenew's wedding. There was just one problem for me. The wedding was to take place on Sigd, the special Ethiopian Jewish holiday, and by chance then Sigd fell on Thanksgiving.

Since I couldn't desert my own family for Alemenew's, I appealed to the NACOEJ Israel office for help. I asked them to aid me in assembling an engagement party in Netivot, Alemenew's home town, during the week I was in Israel. Yehudit Abramson, who is the Israel administrator of the AAS program, eagerly sprang into action, putting together a delightful catered dinner party complete with a disc jockey.

With Alemenew's parents and twelve siblings, and Bosse's parents and nine siblings, plus a few friends, their Rabbi, and a couple of Kesotch (traditional Ethiopian Jewish religious leaders), we soon numbered 45 guests, which made for a very jolly gathering. In addition to a delicious mix of Israeli and Ethiopian fare, there were dancing and speeches. With a Rabbi and two Kesotch, how could you not have speeches? But of course the most impressive speeches came from the family. Although I had previously met Alemenew's father and his eldest sister, this was my first opportunity to meet the rest of his family.

On my ride back to Tel Aviv, I had the opportunity to share a taxi with Gadi Yavarkang, Alemenew's best man. Gadi, also an Ethiopian, besides being a law student and a published poet, is a candidate for the Knesset. (By the time you read this, we will know if he was elected.) In every way, the evening proved to be a most exciting and moving experience that I will long remember.

To have the very special experience I have had sponsoring deserving Ethiopian-Israeli college students, please contact Judy Dick at the NACOEJ office, 212-233-5200, ext. 230, or at college@nacoej.org. ■

Congratulations to...

- Ethiopian-Israeli leader **Avraham Neguise** on receiving his PhD in Philosophy in Education at Sussex College in England. Avraham is the head of the South Wing to Zion organization in Israel, and a recent candidate for the Knesset. Congratulations also to Avraham's wife, Leah, and daughters Ruti and Chani.
- NACOEJ Staff member **Caroline Barg** and husband Hershel on the birth of a grandson, Yitzchak Doniel, to Caroline's daughter Rebecca and husband Rabbi Nahum Spirn and family (including Yitzchak's four big brothers); and to Caroline's son David Sheffey and wife Debby and family on David, an attorney, receiving *smicha* (rabbinic ordination) in Israel.

A Very Special Visitor from Minnesota

Shoshana Ben-Dor, NACOEJ Director in Israel, took Chas Anderson, Deputy Commissioner of Education of the State of Minnesota, to visit some of our NACOEJ *Limudiah* after-school programs of intensive education. Chas had come to Israel accompanying the governor of Minnesota.

Thanks to NACOEJ Board member Harlan Jacobs of Minneapolis, who made the arrangements, Shoshana was able to take Chas to see the *Limudiah* in the Ben Zvi School in Rehovot, where NACOEJ works with students in grades 1-6.

Chas' main interest is preventing children from dropping out of school.

As Shoshana explained to Chas, the *Limudiah* program provides very successful early prevention, enabling Ethiopian-Israeli students to do well in school from the beginning.

The children are able to compete as equals with their peers, and learn both the study skills and self-confidence needed to move on to good academic high schools and higher education. Although the Ethiopian drop-out rate is twice the national average in Israel, very few of our *Limudiah* students drop out.

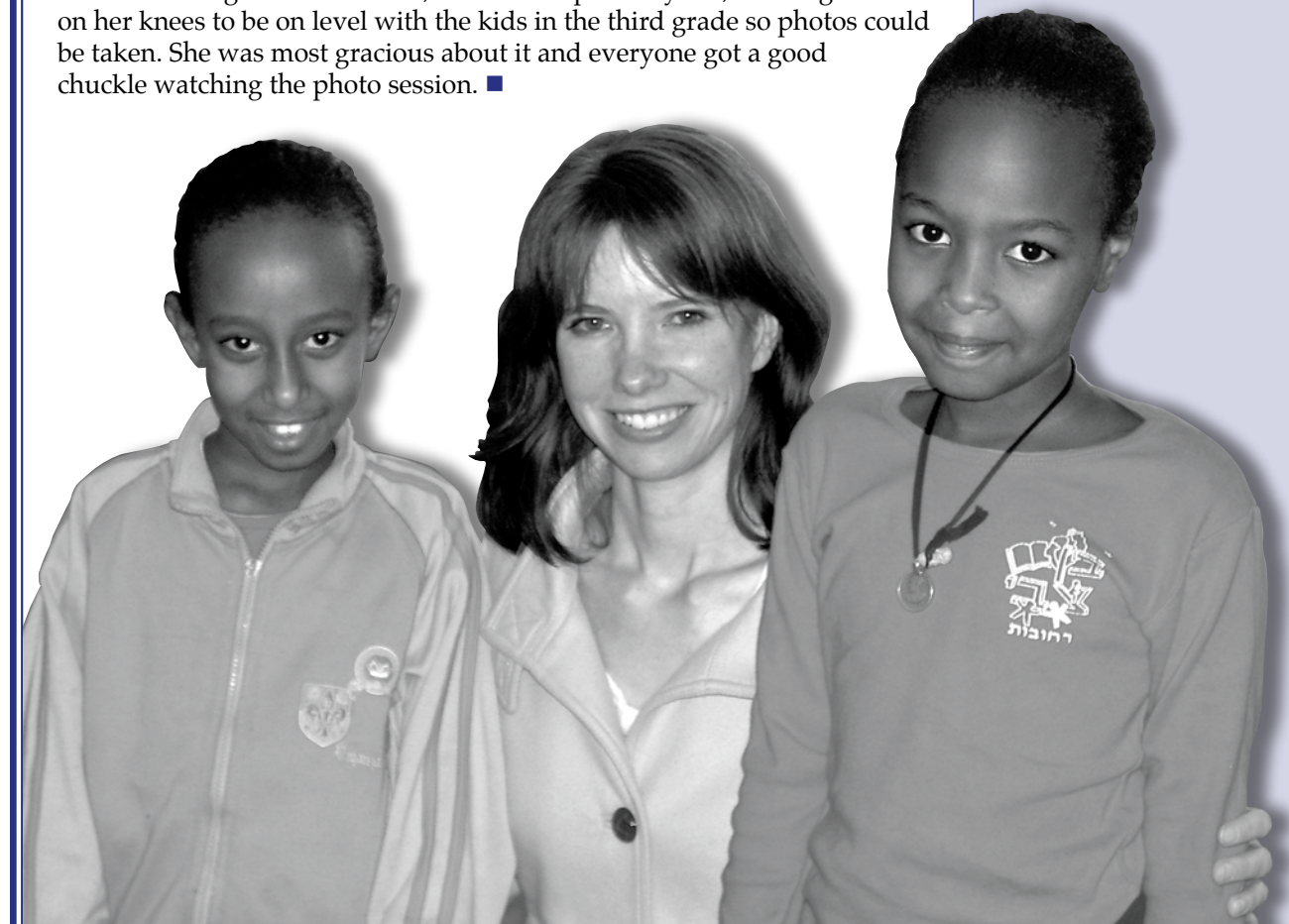
In the sixth-grade group that Shoshana and Chas visited, most of the boys said they want to be professional soccer players when they grow up, but all of them also want to go to university.

The visit was stimulating, educational and beneficial for both Shoshana and Chas, who shared educational theories and experiences and inspired each other.

One amusing side note: Chas, who is exceptionally tall, had to get down on her knees to be on level with the kids in the third grade so photos could be taken. She was most gracious about it and everyone got a good chuckle watching the photo session. ■



Our *Limudiah* programs attract many visitors who want to meet Ethiopian children who are going to "make it" in Israel. Above are visitors from the Birthright Israel program (top photo) and from Yeshiva University Stern College with children in a NACOEJ *Limudiah*.





A Sefer Torah Goes to Israel!

BY SANFORD GOLDHABER,
NACOEJ BOARD MEMBER

Did you ever hear of synagogues that hold daily services except on Monday, Thursday, and Saturday mornings – the days when the Torah is traditionally read?

Well, that is the schedule for many Ethiopian synagogues in Israel. Whenever the Torah is read, the congregants must go to another synagogue because their own doesn't have Torah scrolls. They also have little hope of acquiring them anytime soon because the \$10,000 cost of even second-hand Torahs is beyond their means.

When Barbara Ribakove Gordon, NACOEJ's Executive Director, told me about this situation, I saw the possibility of my own synagogue in Brooklyn, New York donating a Torah. However, I could not in good conscience propose this until I was sure that we would be giving our Torah to people who would value it as much as we did.

Seven years ago, when I participated in a NACOEJ mission to Ethiopia, I saw a community in Gondar that diligently observed a Torah-based Judaism, but in the 2,000 years during which Ethiopian Jews were cut off from the rest of the Jewish people, Judaism had evolved. Were Ethiopian Jews in Israel coping well with the changes?

When I went to Israel to visit Congregation Be'er Avraham in Beit Shemesh, I was very happily surprised. I met Ethiopian-Israelis who would not only be at home in any synagogue, but also could capably lead the services.

My synagogue decided not only to donate a Sefer Torah but to also organize our first congregational trip to Israel in 20 years.

The joint celebration in Beit Shemesh, with Ethiopian singing, dancing and food, was the highlight of the trip for everyone.

After my return to America, I spoke by phone to Rabbi Amir Avraham, the spiritual leader of Be'er Avraham in Beit Shemesh. Normally the rabbi is a very reserved man but I could hear the joy in his voice as he told me that he no longer leads a second-class synagogue because now they have their own Sefer Torah.

Perhaps your synagogue is like mine, a product of mergers, and possessing a surfeit of Sefer Torahs. Please contact Lauren Yoked at the NACOEJ office – 212-233-5200, ext. 227, or lyoked@nacoej.org – and you'll be put in touch with a deserving Ethiopian-Israeli congregation in need of a Sefer Torah.

And what joy you will experience! ■