

# NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY

# LIFELINE

SPRING 2014

## UPDATE: Still Left Behind in Ethiopia

Although we no longer run programs in Ethiopia, we are very active on behalf of the Jews who may have been left behind in Ethiopia in error – rejected by mistake, overlooked, or abandoned in intolerable circumstances. There are some 5,000 to 6,000 of them.

Among the most pitiful are a group of men, women, and children who did not qualify under the strict terms of this aliyah, but have nonetheless already been approved to come to Israel as extreme hardship cases needing family reunification. (For example, an older person who is left penniless and all alone because all the rest of the family made aliyah.)

Who qualifies to go to Israel this way? That's up to the discretion of the Israeli Minister of the Interior – and the last one, Minister Eli Yishai, approved a number of people.

But when the first of this group arrived in Israel, the Ministry of Absorption, which takes care of new immigrants, refused to give them any of the aid Ethiopian immigrants usually get. They were left virtually as penniless in Israel as they were in Ethiopia!

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2



## We Open in Yavne!

No matter how often you've been to Israel, you've probably never visited Yavne. And yet, it's a very important historic city.

It's mentioned in the Bible and remembered as the refuge to which the great sages Yohanan ben Zakkai and Rabbi Gamliel fled with their students to preserve and reshape Judaism after the Second Temple was destroyed.

Today's Yavne is still where it used to be, though the oldest section is buried under the kind of hill archeologists call a "tel" – and very close to the tel, in the current old/new Yavne, is an elementary school called Abir Yaakov. There, in December 2013, we opened our first Yavne Limudiah for 35 Ethiopian-Israeli children.

We are even more excited than usual about this brand-new Limudiah!

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#### **LEFT BEHIND IN ADDIS ABABA**

*As a child, this beautiful young Jewish woman attended the NACOEJ school and went to services in the NACOEJ synagogue in Addis Ababa, where her family – all Jews – waited to make aliyah. At the age of 15, she was forcibly kidnapped by non-Jews and held in servitude. By the time she was rescued eight long years later, her whole family had made aliyah. Today, married with two children, she longs to be reunited with her parents and siblings, and to raise her children as part of a Jewish family in Israel. We hope the Committee of Exceptions will move quickly to end her pain, and make this Jewish family whole at last.*



#### **LEFT BEHIND IN GONDAR**

*In the former NACOEJ synagogue in Gondar, now operated by the local Beta Israel community, men leading services and reading Torah are often the same ones who officiated for the community in the past – but have now been left behind and are hoping to be rechecked.*



#### **YAVNE | CONT. FROM PAGE 1**

First of all, Yavne has been pleading for a Limudiah for close to a year. They also want us to do a full high school program from seventh grade through eleventh in a neighboring girls' school. We haven't said yes to the high school (more about that later) but as soon as we could budget for the Limudiah, we opened up.

And not a moment too soon!

On her first visit to the school, Shoshana Ben-Dor, our wonderful Israel director, was shocked to find a child in second grade struggling with a reading-readiness workbook meant for pre-school children! If our teachers can't help this child, it may be time to check for a learning disorder. We are told that the parents are reluctant, but a home visit from one of our teachers might change their minds. In my experience, our Limudiah teachers can usually solve any problem (except funding the program).

Clearly, Yavne needs us, and clearly, we're delighted to be getting to work.

But there's even more to the feeling that this is a special place for us.

As you may recall, when Israel decided, back in the 1970's, that the Ethiopian Beta Israel were Jews, entitled to make aliyah, the decision was influenced by a ruling from the Radbaz, a 16th century Sage, who

#### **LEFT BEHIND | CONT. FROM PAGE 1**

Now there is a new Minister of the Interior – and the rest of the people mentioned above are still in Ethiopia, not knowing when or if they will be allowed to come to Israel, and who, if anyone, will help them if and when they get there!

As you may recall (following advocacy by NACOEJ and the Israeli Public Committee for Ethiopian Jews), the Ministry of the Interior recently set up a Committee of Exceptions to review challenged Ethiopian rejections.

The Exceptions Committee now has interviewed some of the families in Israel who say their relatives in Ethiopia qualify to come to Israel. Members of the Committee have also interviewed some of the left-behinds in Ethiopia. So far, we have not seen a report.

But a group of young activists in Israel, both Ethiopian and non-Ethiopian, have been meeting on this issue, and have come up with a solution they think is fair.

They want Israel to bring any individual who is already on a list of community members in Addis Ababa and Gondar – or on other Ministry of the Interior lists – if the individual is the direct descendant of an Ethiopian Jew and has a first-degree relative (father, mother, sister, brother, son, daughter) living in Israel.

We will keep you informed by mail and email as developments occur.

Please note: NACOEJ sends emails only to people who have asked to be on our email list. If you wish to be added to that list, please email your request to [nacoej@nacoej.org](mailto:nacoej@nacoej.org) or include it on the enclosed reply card. Thanks. ■





Yavne children in Limudiah: rushing hot lunches to classmates (far left), enjoying their food, and acing the lesson. Photos: Win Robins

said the so-called “Falasha” were well-known to be descended from the lost tribe of Dan.

Well, Yavne, then and now, is located right on the border of Dan’s ancient tribal territory.

So if you concur with the Radbaz about the Dan connection (not everyone does) you may feel that those members of the Ethiopian-Jewish community who have settled in Yavne have come home in a very special, very local way.

And now it is up to us to make sure that these Yavne children get a good start in their very appropriate new home.

We’ll bring our decades of experience, and what one school principal has called our “revolutionary methods”, to the task. We’re delighted that the school principal, the teachers, and the municipality are as happy to have us there as we are to be there. As for the children in the program, they are asking for more Limudiot every week. And the new principal of another Yavne elementary school, who knew Limudiah from previous assignments elsewhere, has urged us to open in her school next fall.

So we’ve started in Yavne with high hopes, boundless enthusiasm, great expectations – but with a budget gap of about \$10,000 that opened up when

a funder unexpectedly dropped out.

If you can help us close this gap, we’ll be right there when you make your next trip to Israel (or even your first), preferably during the school year.

In that event, you’ll be able to put Yavne on your schedule and see the amazing tomb of Rabbi Gamliel – cross an ancient bridge used for centuries by travelers between Cairo and Damascus – explore the remnants of an ancient mosque and a Crusader fortress – visit a beautiful beach just out of town – and of course stop in at your newest NACOEJ Limudiah to fall in love with the children – who may be the latest descendants of Dan!

Just let us know when you’ll be coming – with your help, we’ll be there!

*Barbara*

P.S. About the high school: we can’t plunge into an entire high school program that will be brand-new for us – but we’ve decided to “wade” in with Limudiah-type classes for seventh, eighth and ninth graders who are in very great need of help.

It’s a bit of a risk, but I keep thinking about the high school teachers who told us they can always tell which entering Ethiopian-Israeli students have been in Limudiah because “the

kids from Limudiah come prepared with the skills they need in high school – and the others mostly don’t.”

We know current seventh, eighth, and ninth-grade Yavne youngsters never had Limudiah, and it will be a great privilege to help them acquire their “high school skills” as soon as possible. With your continuing support, we’ll do it...and of course we’ll keep you informed.

Meantime, we already have several teens in Yavne who are sponsored in our High School program, some of them in the high school we hope to work in, and more asking for sponsors. If you’re already sponsoring a Yavne teenager, we can arrange a meeting. If you’re not, and might like to, please see the box on page 5. ■

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**Visit NACOEJ on Facebook  
and receive news about our  
programs, plus updates of  
immediate interest relating to  
the Ethiopian-Jewish community.**

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# SPONSOR A STUDENT IN ISRAEL

## From the Bottom of My Heart...

College student Degito Alamu is in her second year of being sponsored by David and Aviva Rubin, long-time AAS sponsors to many students. Degito came to Israel 12 years ago, lives in Netanya, and is a third-year student in the Oranim College of Education. She's studying elementary school education, with Bible as her major concentration. She told the Rubins she chose Bible because "during high school, I loved Bible stories..." Here are excerpts from a letter Degito sent to the Rubins recently. [You too can share this kind of nachas by sponsoring a college student.](#)

*"First of all, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for your help... I cherish it.*

*"I was excited toward the current academic year, because I knew that it will be more difficult than the previous two years. As part of the college's requirements I have to take part in teacher training in a school... This year I am teaching my area of concentration (Bible).*

*"My training is in the second grade. In the class I teach there is an educational atmosphere that is very pleasant. The students challenge me again every time and I realize I am capable of facing these challenges. When I return from school I feel great satisfaction. One of the things that excites me the most is when the students tell me that they learned something new from me. Not only the students are learning from me, but I am learning a lot from them.*

*"Three weeks ago I taught them about the Sigd holiday and what it means..."*

*I was very happy to see that I was teaching the students and their teacher about a topic that they didn't really know. I was very happy that I was able to teach them about my culture and therefore, I was proud of myself.*

*"Last week one of the students' mothers came to me and told me that her son came home with great excitement because of the lesson I taught... she told me that they began to read about the Ethiopian Jews and about the journey to Israel. In my opinion one of the most important things about education is exposing the students to new information and new experiences.*

*"Right now I'm in the middle of the first semester and it is getting busy academically. I hope I can overcome the difficulties easily.*

*"I believe life sometimes brings us difficult periods, and being wise is to know how to overcome these periods in a good manner. Thank you."*

Degito Alamu

And here is a note sent by the Rubins to Karen Gens, NACOEJ New York Coordinator of Educational Programs. Karen had sent several thank-you letters to the Rubins from their students, including Degito.

*"Dear Karen,*

*"All of the notes that you have passed along to us over the past week are beautiful. It is a real privilege and honor to help these wonderful young people in their studies. We'll be writing back over the next week.*

*"We wish you and the rest of the NACOEJ team our best. Your work is terrifically important. Kol Tuv.*

*Shabbat Shalom, David and Aviva Rubin"*

## College Students who Need You



**EMOHAJ  
TAFERA**  
Health Systems  
Management/  
Emek Yezreel  
College

My name is Emohai Tafera. I'm a second-year student in Health Systems Management in Emek Yezreel College. I was born in Ethiopia in 1986 in Gondar. In 1989 we moved to Addis Ababa, where we waited three years to go to Israel.

When we arrived in Israel, we lived in an absorption center called Maagalim for three years, then we moved to Kiryat Malachi. While I was in the religious high school in Kiryat Malachi, I was in Bnei Akiva [a religious Zionist youth organization]. When I was 17, I was a guide in Bnei Akiva and also volunteered with organizations that collected and distributed food to disadvantaged families.

At 19, I joined the army and served in the Givati patrol unit as a combat soldier, commander, and combat medic. After my military service, I was a security guard at a border crossing.

In 2010/11, I was in a preparatory program at Ben-Gurion University and was then accepted at the university and studied Health Systems. But it was very hard because I had to work full-time to finance myself and pay for rent.

Combining work and study became very difficult and I left the university. But I thought about it over that summer and resolved not to give up. I registered at the Emek Yezreel College and took out a loan from the bank. I also received a small scholarship\* that required some volunteer work. I finished the first year in the Emek Yezreel College with an average of 80.

In 2015, I will graduate. I hope to work at one of the HMO's in the periphery of Israel. I feel there is an enormous gap between the services people receive

in the center of the country and in the periphery. It is important for me to try to minimize this gap. Thank you very much for giving students like me, who are in a low socio-economic situation, the opportunity to continue and not give up on our dreams due to financial difficulty.

*Editor's Note: \*This scholarship, which some AAS students have received, is indeed very small, and in no way eliminates the need for the NACOEJ sponsorship stipend. We are very impressed with this young man's determination to help others. If you want to be the one to help him, please contact Karen Gens at 212-233-5200, ext. 230 or email: Education@nacoej.org.*



**ALIZA  
YITZHAK**  
Accounting/Peres  
Academic Center

My parents were born in a village in Ethiopia. With guides, they went to Sudan as the first step to Israel. Along the way robbers took their money.

## High School Students who Need You

The road to Sudan was difficult and long. They walked on foot all night with only the moon for light. There were biting bugs and dangerous snakes.

Many people lost relatives along the way. They could not give them a proper burial. It was too dangerous to stop.

My parents finally reached a refugee camp in Sudan. My mother says G-d was on their side.

They stayed in Sudan for almost four years, all the while hiding their identity. If they were found out to be Jews, they would have been kidnapped and tortured. They finally arrived in Israel in 1983.

I was born in Pardes Hanna. I have three sisters and one brother. After two years at the absorption center, we moved to Bat Yam. In high school I studied communications, and then I joined the army.

I finished boot camp with honors and received a special opportunity to attend a commanding squad course. It was challenging but I learned that everything is possible if you believe in yourself.

I have been working in the airport for six years. In addition to administrative work, when needed, I also work in customs.

I studied at a preparatory program, then I began to study for a degree in business administration at the Peres Academic Center in Rehovot, specializing in accounting. I am now in my second year with an average of 75.

I turn to you asking for help in completing another year of study. My parents cannot help me at all. I want to succeed in life. The way to do so is with higher education. With G-d's help, when I finish my degree and get some experience, my dream is to open a private business of my own.

*Editor's Note: you can be the one to help Aliza become a successful businesswoman! Just call Karen Gens at 212-233-5200, ext.230 or email: Education@nacoej.org.*



**YAKIR WORKANI**  
8th grade  
Eliezer Ben Yehuda School in Ness Ziona

I was born in Be'er Sheva in 2000. My mother,

little brother and I live together. My mother has difficulty with Hebrew so I very often translate to Amharic for her (if I know how to say it!).

My mother works hard in a kitchen. When she comes home from work she is very tired, so I help take care of my little brother who is seven years old. We play games and I help him with his homework.

I am new in my school. I study in a small class for kids with learning disabilities. There wasn't the right school for me in my city so I have to go to this high school in Ness Ziona. I was worried about going to a new school but I have already made friends. My favorite subjects are PE and English. Math is my hardest subject.

I want to be a good student so my mother will be proud of me because she always tells me and my brother how important it is to study.

I wish you a good year and I thank you for the help you are giving people from my community to become successful in school.

*Editor's Note: Yakir is a very special boy. Despite his learning problems, he translates for his mother and helps his brother with his homework! His winning smile surely helps explain why he easily made new friends.*

*Yakir urgently needs a sponsor. If you can grant his wish please contact Karen Gens at NACOEJ at 212-233-5200, ext. 230 or email: Education@nacoej.org.*



**ADI ABEBE**  
7th grade  
Alon Ginsburg School in Yavne

My name is Adi. I was born in Israel on April 16, 2001.

I have two brothers and two sisters. My mother works very hard cleaning in an elementary school here in Yavne. She also helps out the elderly in their homes through an agency. This is how she supports me and my brothers and sisters.

In school I like to study Hebrew and literature most of all.

When I grow up, I would very much like to be a judge because I think it is a very interesting profession.

Thank you for helping me and my mother.

*Editor's Note: Adi too has a winning smile. She cares deeply for her mother and wants to be able to relieve some of Mom's financial strain. For Adi to participate fully in her middle/high school, she needs a sponsor. Surely a girl who dreams of being a judge needs the best education available. You can become Adi's sponsor by contacting Karen Gens at NACOEJ at 212-233-5200, ext. 230 or email: Education@nacoej.org.*

**TO SPONSOR AN ETHIOPIAN-ISRAELI COLLEGE OR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT, and help make their dreams come true, please contact Karen Gens at 212-233-5200, ext. 230 or email: Education@nacoej.org. Please tell Karen you learned about the students in Lifeline.**





ABOVE: At the Rambam School (one of our oldest Limudiot, since 1995) in Lod, little boys with paper dreidels (traditional Chanukah spinning toys) perched on their heads, giggle and have Chanukah fun together.

RIGHT: A little girl dresses up as a pink dreidel with Nes Gadol (a great miracle) printed on it.



## Chanukah in the Limudiah

Chanukah 2013 was a joyous celebration for the children in our Limudiah programs. Here are some photos taken by our wonderful volunteer photographer, Win Robins, which express clearly the delightful time the children (and their parents and teachers) had just before Chanukah.



ABOVE: At the Sinai School (one of our newest Limudiot, 2012-2013) in Gan Yavne (a different town from Yavne), a teacher organizes a Chanukah play.

RIGHT: An eager little boy raises his hand to answer a Chanukah question as his mother proudly looks on. Another mother (left) can be seen in the background, working on a Chanukah project with the children.



Photos: Win Robins

## On the Road with NACOEJ Speakers

NACOEJ speakers have been traveling a lot lately, to brief large and small groups about current issues: aliyah (see p.1); blood donations; NACOEJ programs – and, of course, to talk about Ethiopian-Israelis with amazing success stories.

To inquire about a speaker for your own community, please contact Danielle Ben-Jehudah at [donors@nacoej.org](mailto:donors@nacoej.org) or phone 212-233-5200, ext. 227.



*In the Fair Lawn, NJ Jewish Center, Barbara Ribakove Gordon (third from right) had dinner with Rabbi Ron Roth of Congregation B'nai Israel and a core group from their Men's Progress Club. The Club generously supports NACOEJ programs, and its knowledgeable leaders wanted an informal update on issues in both Israel and Ethiopia.*



*After a talk and video at the Pelham, NY Jewish Center, Barbara answered surprisingly tough questions from Gimmel Class children who were learning about Ethiopian Jews.*

*Education Director, Ana Turkienicz, sent a sweet email: "Thank you so much for coming to kick off our annual fundraiser for NACOEJ. Your personal story touched all our hearts, and will be remembered by the students, teachers and parents who were present. We have a new generation coming up that needs to be educated about Graenum Berger's legacy and the plight of the Ethiopian Jews."*

*(Editor's note: Graenum Berger, z"l, a long-time member of the Pelham Jewish Center, was a great pioneer of American Jewish activity on behalf of the recognition and rescue of Ethiopian Jews.)*

## Another Blood Scandal?

Last December, when the Magen David Adom (Israel's equivalent to the Red Cross) showed up at the Knesset for a traditional blood drive, Knesset Member Pnina Tamanu Shata, an Ethiopian Israeli, was not allowed to donate because, the technician said, "Ethiopians have special blood".

MK Shata was furious.

There were reporters present for the blood drive, so the story appeared in the world-wide media – with the familiar accusation that Israel is racist.

What's going on here? Are we having a replay of the ugly blood scandal that erupted back in 1996 when it was discovered that blood donated by Ethiopians was being thrown away in secret?

Back then, when the story broke, the Ethiopian-Israeli community was not only infuriated, but deeply, deeply hurt. To Bible-oriented Ethiopians, blood is a person's life, and to throw it away was to throw the person away.

Within hours of the new Knesset incident, an international debate was raging. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other dignitaries phoned MK Shata to express their distress and to promise to review blood donation policies.

Magen David Adom representatives in America, and health officials in Israel, indignantly explained that to protect the nation's blood supply from spreading HIV, anyone, not just Ethiopians, who had been born in, or lived for three years in, any country with a high HIV rate, wasn't allowed to donate – unless they agreed to have their blood isolated and frozen to be examined later.

The list of at-risk countries did include Ethiopia – but also Chad, Cameroon, Nigeria, some Caribbean countries, and more.

And it was quickly pointed out that the United States and Canada have similar guidelines for blood donations.

A spokesperson for American Friends of Magen David Adom said that, far from discriminating against Ethiopians, "MDA takes blood donations from

native-born Israelis of Ethiopian descent regularly," and added that "blood donations are also deferred from people who lived in Britain between 1980 and 1996 because of potential exposure to mad-cow disease."

(Barbara adds that because her decades of travel to Ethiopia required taking malaria-prevention pills, she could not donate blood in the U.S. for many years, even though she never had malaria.)

But MK Shata was not mollified. In Israel, the burden falls so heavily on the growing Ethiopian population.

MK Shata was, indeed, born in Ethiopia and she lived there until the ripe old age of three, which made her blood technically risky – but shouldn't consideration be given to the fact that she had since lived in Israel since 1984, served in the army, borne two children, and been elected to the Knesset without any sign of illness? Why wasn't there special consideration for her and people like her?

In response, Professor Eilat Shinar, Director of Blood Services for the MDA, said, "While the risk of any type of pathogen is relatively small from an Ethiopian Israeli who's lived in Israel for many years, it's Israeli Ministry of Health policy, based on international protocols, to reduce exposure to nearly zero percent for the safety of the blood recipients."

So the only alternative to rejection at this time is to have your blood isolated, frozen, and rechecked at a later time when any pathogens would show up. Since MK Shata and many others find that unacceptable, the debate goes on.

As we write, no easy answers have emerged. It's an on-going problem faced by every country that wants to keep its blood supply risk-free.

We can hope that Israel, which often comes up with surprising solutions to difficult problems, will find a way to let people like MK Pnina Tamanu Shata donate in dignity.

Meantime, it isn't racism, just a complicated problem without a simple solution – yet. ■



**RIGHT:**  
Jonas Plaut and his parents, Lori Plaut and Rabbi Joshua Eli Plaut, with the Torah scroll he received for his Bar Mitzvah and its cover made of Ethiopian embroideries.

**BELOW:**  
The tallit bag the Plauts made from a Joseph embroidery.



## A Beautiful Bar Mitzvah Twinning Story

By Jonas Jacob Plaut

**M**y parents gave me a precious gift for my Bar Mitzvah: a 200-year-old Torah scroll! I love the calligraphy and think the crowns and flourishes over certain of the Hebrew letters are gorgeous. I can't imagine how many people have read from this Torah scroll before me! My parents bought it in Jerusalem from a family friend, a Yemenite who's known my father since he was ten. We brought the scroll back to New York where it was repaired by a scribe who said the Torah is of German-Bohemian origin.

For my Bar Mitzvah, through NACOEJ, I have been paired with an Ethiopian boy named Natan, who lives in Lod, Israel. Three years ago, I went to visit him and spent some time with his family. Natan and I have since corresponded in Hebrew.

Because of my special connection to Natan, my mother commissioned a Torah cover made from Ethiopian-Jewish embroideries. We chose two, one for each side. One has an image of Jonah and the Whale and the other is of Jacob and the Ladder, reflecting my two names...Jonas Jacob. We purchased them from NACOEJ, along with a Mizrach to be made into a binder for the Torah, and additional embroideries to be made into a tallit bag. My mother found an artist, Heather Stolz ([www.sewingstories.com](http://www.sewingstories.com)), to make the cover and the binder.

It is amazing to try to imagine where this Torah might have been. And it is also amazing to imagine where this scroll will go. Now the Torah, and the amazing cover made from Ethiopian-Jewish embroideries, become part of both my family's history and my family's future! ■

*Editor's note: to learn more about Bar/Bat Mitzvah Twinning and the wonderful relationships that can develop, email Miriam Weissman at [mweissman@nacoej.org](mailto:mweissman@nacoej.org) or call 212-233-5200, ext. 222.*



### Congratulations To...

**FENTAHUN ASSEFA-DAWIT,**  
an old friend from Ethiopia,  
who takes on a new job  
in Israel.

I first met Fentahun in Waleka Village in 1984. He was just a child. But what a child! He spoke, read and wrote in English! He spoke, read, and prayed in Hebrew! (Only recently, he told me a secret: when we met, he didn't believe I was really Jewish, because I couldn't speak Hebrew.)

Over many years, NACOEJ missions watched Fentahun and his best friend and close relative, Avisholem Dawit, grow up, and start hiking into Gondar City for high school. We had many warm and loving meetings in Waleka, and some scary ones on street corners in town or on a road near our hotel when the then-Communist government forbade us to meet.

Today, Fentahun is no longer a kid. He's an Israeli, a married man, a father, and a graduate of Technion, Israel's MIT. After years of directing absorption centers for the Jewish Agency and representing the Agency abroad, he has just become the CEO of Tebeka, the Ethiopian-Israeli Legal Aid Society that was, until his recent retirement, led by its founder, Ethiopian-Israeli Itzik Dessie.

Tebeka is an important organization of Ethiopian-Israeli lawyers (some of them AAS graduates). It leads efforts to ensure that Ethiopian-Israeli citizens have equality in employment, housing, school admission and more – and that incidents of discrimination or hate speech can be taken to court and punished by Israeli law.

Tebeka also teaches new immigrants their civil rights and responsibilities, assists law students, and has a broad vision – which Fentahun describes: "We want to put ourselves out of business," he recently told the "Jerusalem Report", "so there won't be a need for our services. Israel cannot afford to have second-class citizens of Ethiopian origin. We want a normal society in which Ethiopians won't be different from anyone else."

NACOEJ and Tebeka have always had a good relationship. Now, we hope it will be even closer, with 30 years of personal friendship on which to build. Congratulations, Fentahun!

*Barbara*

#### NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY

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