

LIFELINE

NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY

SUMMER 2009

The May 2009 NACOEJ Mission to Ethiopia and Israel

INTRODUCTION

The child in the photo tells the whole story. She stood silently before us when our NACOEJ Ethiopia-Israel Mission reached an absorption center near Jerusalem, where she and her family had been living for a year.

Her huge eyes turned toward us, eloquently pleading for help – and pressed against her body, she held a photo for us to see – a photo of the rest of her family where we had left them only a few days before, still waiting in Gondar.

Our little group of American NACOEJ members went to Ethiopia this past May to commemorate the 18th Anniversary of the great May, 1991 Operation Solomon airlift that had brought over 14,000 Jews from Ethiopia to Israel in 36 hours.

We traced the route the Jews had taken – from Gondar Province in northwestern Ethiopia, the traditional home of the Jews, down through the fields and mountains, over the gorges of the Blue Nile, through fog and sunshine and the brief downpours of the early rainy season, more than 300 miles south to Addis Ababa, the national capital, from which we – like the Ethiopian



Jews in May, 1991 – flew across the Red Sea to Israel.

For the Ethiopian Jews, traveling south 18 years ago, in the midst of war and desolation, hungry and thirsty, ill and exhausted, it was a dangerous journey, but it ended in the miracle of homecoming to Israel.

For us, it was an adventure in which electrical blackouts, occasional lack of flush toilets and hot showers were just part of the experience – but the brave people we met, the squalid homes we visited, the school that warmed our hearts and the cemetery that broke them, were moments that we would carry with us forever.

For most people in our group, it was their first experience in Ethiopia. For some of us, it was not the first and certainly not the last. But for all of us, this journey too ended in the miracle of Israel,

and the embrace of Ethiopian Jews who were now Ethiopian Israelis.

The great journey has not ended. Like the Jews left behind, and the Jews who wait for them in Israel, we all hope for the miracle still to come.

The pictures on the following pages are the details.

GOOD NEWS AT LAST!

The long-interrupted processing of applications for aliyah from Gondar has been resumed! Three representatives of Israel have arrived in Gondar. They are scheduled to check credentials of only a portion of the community, but we have reason to hope the whole 8700 will be checked. At this point, however, the plan is to take to Israel only 100 people a month, so we – and they – still have a long way to go.

THE MISSION IN ETHIOPIA

A Shock and a Smile

As always, the poverty in Gondar comes as a shock to first-time visitors.

In one row of shacks near the Beta Israel Compound – considered “good” housing – 80 people, including many children, share one primitive latrine. Hovels are tiny and dark, with no more than one narrow cot for a family. Children sleep on thin mats on the dirt floor.

Last year’s mosquito nets (funded by some very special American Bar Mitzvah boys) are carefully hung from walls. We are delighted that additional donations through our web site are funding 500 more nets in time for this year’s peak malaria season. A NACOEJ Young Leadership group will help install the nets in August.



Further from the Beta Israel compound, some families live in unfinished mud huts with gaping holes in the walls and roof, so far away and inaccessible that our school children will have to walk long distances to get to a road where we hope to have a van waiting to take the youngest to school.

Life is hard, but what amazes me anew, time after time, is the way Ethiopians, Jewish and non-Jewish, are so ready to be happy, even for a moment, whenever the opportunity arises.

For example, one of our most skilled photographers, Paula Friedman, was surrounded by little groups of excited, delighted children and adults with every photo she took. They were thrilled to see themselves in the colorful images in her camera.

PHOTOS BY
MISSION
MEMBERS
AND
OTHERS



On The Job

There turned out to be women as well as men working at the site where the new NACOEJ elementary school was being constructed!!

I had had no idea that Ethiopian women went out for construction jobs, but they do – and the women we met looked happy. Some were chatting with each other as they worked, and they enjoyed being photographed. (If the photos look yellow, it’s because a heavy fog had settled in!)

Some women were moving rocks or dirt from one spot to another, using wooden litters; others were stamping the ground smooth with tools I’d never seen before, and some were watering down newly laid concrete.

So, now we will be funding tools for women as well as men. As Abigail Adams famously told her husband, Founding Father John Adams, when he was helping to create a new nation, “Remember the ladies!”

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The Group

Lined up in front of the brightly decorated wall of our temporary school are, left to right, Ato Asrat, Principal for Secular Studies; Marion Cohen of Boston; Daniel Friedman of Idaluna, New York; Barbara Ribakove Gordon of NACOEJ; Marion Rettick of New York City; Shirley Landau of Los Angeles; Ato Getu Zemene, NACOEJ Country Director; Ato Kefale Belaye, Principal for Jewish Studies; and Orlee Guttman of NACOEJ. Standing behind his wife Marion is Hans Seidemann. Kneeling in front is Daniel Friedman's wife Paula.



A Sad Moment

The children's cemetery at Aba Antonius is nestled on a hillside, but we are told it is rapidly expanding. On the day we visited, a new grave for a baby was covered with stones and branches till a tombstone could be erected. The tombstones are lovingly painted, and sometimes display a photo of the child.



Sick in Bed

Illness is common – malaria, asthma, bronchitis, tuberculosis, measles, eye problems, and much more.

The child sharing the family's only cot with his mother has diarrhea, which can kill untreated children in Third World countries. The mother is also ill, with an undiagnosed problem.

The JDC has closed its free Gondar clinic, leaving the Jews without medical care. Few can afford to pay for treatment. We all hope the JDC will return to Gondar but, in the meantime, the generous response from our NACOEJ family will help us get care for at least some of the sick.

Calling the Names

We went to morning services at the Gondar synagogue. Hundreds of men and women, and lots of pre-school children, packed the benches. Teenage boys passed out hand-woven talleisim; some tefillin were distributed.

The service was in Amharic, with a few prayers in Hebrew, and everyone – even the children – paid close attention, responding with "amen" at the right moments.

At the end of the service, something unexpected happened. Even without understanding Amharic, we thought it sounded like a list of names being read out.

Was it a list of yahrzeits? Or, heaven forbid, a list of the sick, dying or dead? None of the above.

It was a roll call of community members whose relatives in Israel had sent a little money via a courier, an Ethiopian-Israeli who had flown to Gondar. The courier had just arrived to distribute the funds.

Those of us who know how poor Ethiopian families are in Israel, had tears in our eyes. That precious money meant there would be less food on tables in Lod or Netanya or Jerusalem – but a little more food, or rent for a hovel, in Gondar. **Across the Red Sea, these broken families reached out to each other, in the unbreakable bonds of caring.**



THE MISSION IN ETHIOPIA (CONTINUED)



School Days

The NACOEJ Beta Israel School operates in two shifts to accommodate over 900 children (we expect over 1,000 this fall). Some classes have as many as 50 children, which is normal in Ethiopia. Funds permitting, we would like to have more classrooms, more teachers, fewer children per class. But we're amazed and delighted by the intense learning going on.

In the Jewish Studies program, children prepare for life in Israel with Hebrew lessons and classes in Jewish history, traditions and Israeli customs.

Members of our group were astonished at the quiet discipline the children displayed as a matter of course – and we are told that some Gondar authorities are astonished that the children absorb the dual curriculum easily, and get high marks in regional tests.

You'll note that some of the children are much taller than others. We have first-graders who are 10, 12 or 13 years old, who have never had a chance to go to school before.

School Lunch

This five-days-a-week, nutritious meal is still incredibly important to the children. Thanks to the generosity of our NACOEJ family, despite soaring food prices, bananas are back on the menu one day a week, and even though Ethiopian schools are closed during July and August, we can keep the Jewish Studies program open for Hebrew lessons – and lunch.



THE MISSION IN I



Recording

Photographer Marion Cohen helps NACOEJ College Adopt-A-Student Ayal Marsha, a budding photographer, to record the Mission group's visit.



Getu Learns about Israeli Schools

NACOEJ Country Director Getu Zemene reacts to comments from a second-grade student in a *Limudiah* class in Israel. The trip gave Getu the opportunity to see Israeli schooling first-hand. He will help prepare children and families in Ethiopia for the transition.

ISRAEL



The Digital Age

Mission member Shirley Landau explains her digital camera to *Limudiah* students in Lod.



Emotional Meeting

At an absorption center near Jerusalem, Getu was greeted as a hero by hundreds of immigrant Ethiopian Jews whom he had cared for and protected in Gondar. Everyone cried – including Mission participants. Many immigrants made speeches of thanks and welcome.

For some of us, the most moving moment of all came when one immigrant man, thanking NACOEJ for our support in Ethiopia, told us that his young daughter's best memory of life in Gondar was the school lunch she ate every day!

You'll find more about NACOEJ programs in Israel in this *Lifeline*.

Ethiopian Legacy Takes Its Rightful Place

Israel is a beautiful mosaic of Jews from all around the world, each group contributing their own unique customs to enrich the Jewish State.

Ethiopian immigrants, however, were often too shy, too overwhelmed, and sometimes too proud to complain that their ancient traditions were ignored.

But now, with 120,000 Ethiopians in Israel, many of them college graduates, young professionals, IDF officers and parents raising a new generation of Ethiopian Israelis, they have found their voice, and are demanding that their story become part of the fabric of Israeli life.

As a result, the Ethiopian-Jewish holiday of Sigd, which has been celebrated in Jerusalem for some years, will soon become a national holiday. Sigd takes place on the 29th of Cheshvan, 50 days after Yom Kippur.

The holiday celebrates the renewal of the Covenant by Ezra the Scribe, after the Jews returned from Babylonian exile. It is described in the Book of Nechemia: *"All the people gathered themselves together as one man into the broad place that was before the water gate; and they spoke unto Ezra the Scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded to Israel."*

In Ethiopia, Jews "gathered themselves together" to observe Sigd on mountaintops outside their villages. The *Kessim*, the community's rabbis, followed by the people, all fasting, would ascend the local mountain (which represented Mount Sinai) for hours of prayer, sermons and beautiful ritual chanting. After services, the entire community would descend the mountain, singing and dancing, to break their fast with a feast.

Since Ethiopian Jews came to Israel, Sigd has become a celebration of their return to Zion and their yearning for the rebuilding of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Now that it is a recognized national holiday, the Sigd tradition will start being taught in Israeli schools.

In addition, following demands by the Ethiopian Jewish community, Israeli Absorption Minister Sofa Landver has called on the Education Ministry to publish the story of the Ethiopian aliyah in school textbooks.

This new era of recognition will bring all Israelis closer to the Ethiopian Jewish community and its rich, beautiful, and unique legacy. ■



HERE IS AN ADDITIONAL WAY TO HELP ETHIOPIAN JEWS.

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Come Share the Nachas!

Before your next trip to Israel, be sure to contact the NACOEJ office in New York. If it's during the school year, we can arrange for you to visit the *Limudiah*, NACOEJ's intensive after-school educational programs for Ethiopian youngsters.

We guarantee that when you see these children bent over their desks, pencils flying, smiles the size of Montana, you will experience tremendous *nachas* (satisfaction), knowing that your support is enabling these immigrant children to learn – and to love learning!

Because of your caring, over 80% of the Ethiopian-Israeli children in NACOEJ programs achieve grade level – and beyond – compared to only about 35% of those who don't have the NACOEJ *Limudiah* classes! And though the school dropout rate for Ethiopian children is twice the national average, children in *Limudiah* classes do not drop out.

In fact, as we put this *Lifeline* together, a call from our Israel office told us that two cities –

Rehovot and Gedera – were so pleased with the results of the *Limudiah* in their schools that they want us to enroll hundreds of additional Ethiopian children this fall.

We said we'd love to – but given the economy, we fear we will actually have to cut hundreds of children out of *Limudiah* in September.

A \$1,400 gift keeps one child in *Limudiah* for a whole school year. Any amount is welcome.

Can you help? Contact Orlee Guttman at 212-233-5200, ext. 224 or email to oguttman@nacoej.org. Or you can check off the box on the enclosed reply card. ■

Congratulations...

- To NACOEJ Board Member **Peachy Levy** and husband Mark on receiving Honorary Doctoral Degrees from the American Jewish University for their "...dedication to providing young Jews with the Jewish experience of camps and Israel... one of their fiercest commitments."
- To NACOEJ Vice President **Richard Tell** and wife Ann on the birth of a grandson, Alexander Nathaniel, and to their daughter Nina Segil and husband Clifford.
- To NACOEJ staff member **Caroline Barg**, husband Hershel and their families, on the Bat Mitzvahs of Caroline's granddaughter Yaffa Sheffey of Teaneck, NJ and Hershel's granddaughters Basya Temima Glantz of Lakewood, NJ and Tziporah Faiga Wittenstein of Jerusalem.



Peachy and Mark Levy at the dedication of the Campus Center that bears their names at Camp Alonim on the Brandeis/Bardin campus of the American Jewish University in Los Angeles.



Israel Mahari Needs a Sponsor

Israel Mahari is a charming, energetic seventh grader who lives in Rehovot. He's a great student with a particular love for dancing, something that is very much in the Ethiopian tradition.

Israel needs a sponsor to enable him to attend a good academic high school in Israel, and he's written the letter below about his life and his desire to excel in school.

At the very end of Israel's letter you will see that he mentions how he would like to relate to the sponsor he hopes to have, and what he thinks of the generous people who give of themselves to help children like him.

Here's Israel's letter (translated). After you read it, please consider becoming the lucky person who gets to sponsor this lovable boy!

Shalom...I was born in Israel in 1996. My parents immigrated to Israel after going through Sudan, and almost paid for it with their lives. They returned to

where they lived but didn't stop trying to immigrate, and my father was jailed a few times because of that. But eventually they were able to get on the plane to Israel. Today my father works in a storage company and my mother doesn't work right now, although she usually works in cleaning. I also have four smaller siblings.

My hobby is Hip-Hop and break-dance, and my favorite subject in school is math. When I grow up I want to become a dancer.

What I would like to know about my sponsor [when he has one], is how is he feeling? And does he realize how much help and support he gives people?

Thank you very much for your generous help!

Israel Mahari

For further information on sponsoring Israel Mahari for high school, or another deserving Ethiopian-Israeli youngster, please contact Judy Dick at the NACOEJ office, 212-233-5200, ext. 230 or email to highschool@nacoej.org. ■

Tigist Got Her Shoes!

In our last *Lifeline* we told you about Tigist Bitau, the Ethiopian 5th grader who's in our *Limudiah* in Nes Ziona.

Tigist has a tremendous talent for running. When we wrote about her previously, she'd been entered in a 2500 meter race. Someone made a mistake and placed Tigist in a 16-year-old group though she's only 12.

Too shy to complain, Tigist ran with the 16-year-olds and she won! She went onto a regular training schedule and everything was fine until she outgrew her running shoes, her feet hurt, and her family couldn't afford new shoes.

When we told you about Tigist's situation, long-time NACOEJ supporter Esther Levy promptly sent a check, and Tigist got new running shoes. Here's Tigist's thank-you letter (translated):

Thanks to my new sports shoes I came first on a track race that took place on Sunday, March 29th, 2009 in Tel Aviv.

Thank you for your help and support. Thank you for giving me things. I wish you a very happy holiday. I thank you for all the good things you give me and for what you have done for me.

Continue to do what you do, helping people and supporting good people. I wish you luck in everything that you do. Thank you for buying me running shoes with which I can participate in races and win...Tigist.

A Quick Reminder...

One of the important keys to success in life is a good solid education that opens the door to the future. But what happens when you are a child living in poverty? What happens if your parents are immigrants who may not have a command of the new country's language or culture, and who struggle to make even a meager living?

What happens is that you need extra help.

For Ethiopian-Israeli children, that help comes first from NACOEJ in our *Limudiah* after-school programs of intensive education. Then it comes from our Edward G. Victor High School Sponsorship Program, and from our Vidal Sassoon Adopt-A-Student College Sponsorship Program. Other NACOEJ programs also enable young Ethiopian Israelis to continue and complete their education.

Interested? Visit our web site: www.nacoej.org or contact us:

For *Limudiah*,

call Orlee Guttman at 212-233-5200, ext. 224 or email to oguttman@nacoej.org

For High School and College sponsorships,

call Judy Dick at 212-233-5200, ext. 230 or email to highschool@nacoej.org or college@nacoej.org

For Bar/Bat Mitzvah Twinning,

call Miriam Weissman at 212-233-5200, ext. 222 or email to mweissman@nacoej.org

You'll find out how you can have the pleasure of changing the life of deserving youngsters in Israel.



Matan Malede: A Cry from the Heart

At age nine, Matan Malede was orphaned when his parents and an older brother died trying to find a way to Israel via Sudan for their Jewish family.

But their dream was not allowed to die. Matan's remaining older brother took him by the hand and the two boys walked over 300 mountainous miles to Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. From there, they were eventually airlifted to Israel, and to an orphans' home in the north.

Let Matan tell the rest, in his own imperfect but eloquent English:

I made immigration to Israel in 1992. With my brother my parents die in way to Israel, I was nine years old me and my brother were so sad about the situation that we are alone, no family, so much crying, in place that we are not know nothing! What to do? Where to go? Who can care about us? All that question was in my mind! With the time we got some people that help us to survivor in new country, new culture, new life!

Thinking back, Matan calls it, "hard absorption" and remembers being unable to stop mourning for his parents, "that they couldn't make them dreams to get here, to holy land (Jerusalem)."

But hard or not, Matan made it! He was eventually sent to the outstanding Yemin Orde High School in Haifa, where he became an excellent student "because a lot of good people help me with studies and economic situation."

Today, Matan, having finished his army service, has started studying business management ("to be independent") in the Machon Lev College of Jerusalem. With no family to help him pay for food, rent, books, or other basic necessities, Matan needs one more helping hand – an Adopt-A-Student Sponsor.

Will some more "good people" come to his aid? You can look forward to many more eloquent letters from this open-hearted and ambitious young man with a future. It costs much less than you may think to "adopt" a student through NACOEJ. Contact Judy Dick at 212-233-5200, ext. 230 or email to college@nacoej.org. ■

Become a Part of the New Generation of Young Leaders!

You can come in on the ground floor of the exciting new NACOEJ Young Leadership Program. You will work with dynamic young professionals like yourself. You will learn first-hand about the issues surrounding Ethiopian Jews, and take a leadership role in a host of exciting activities geared to providing much-needed support for this struggling Jewish community.

For more information, please call Lauren Yoked at 212-233-5200, ext. 227 or email to lyoked@nacoej.org.

Condolences to...

- The family of NACOEJ benefactor **Walter (Wally) Marks, Jr.** of Los Angeles, who passed away this spring. Wally's philanthropy and enthusiasm aided many good causes, Ethiopian children among them. Our hearts go out to Suzy and the entire family.
- The family of long-time NACOEJ supporter **Sybil Hite**, whose concern for Ethiopian children in Israel made her a generous patron of the NACOEJ *Limudiah*. Our hearts are with Sybil's husband Larry and daughters Samantha and Tessa.
- NACOEJ Advisory Board member **Rabbi Dr. Irving "Yitz" Greenberg**, on the death of his sister, Lillian Zupnick. Our thoughts are with Yitz, wife Blu, and all the family.
- Ethiopian-Israeli leader **Dr. Avraham Neguise** on the loss of his father, Beyane Neguise, a widely known and respected elder of the community. Avraham has always attributed his own dedication to the aliyah and absorption of Ethiopian Jews to his father's instructions: "Don't think that because you have education you can be a prince and stay in a palace. You must go out there where the people are suffering, and help them."

Thousands of Ethiopians and other Israelis paid their respects at traditional Ethiopian memorial rites as well as in shiva calls. All of us at NACOEJ join them in hoping the Neguise family will find consolation in the memory of an outstanding leader whose heritage is reflected in the new lives of his community in Israel.