



SUMMER 2021



NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY



LIFELINE



A CRISIS IN ISRAEL

An educator once told us it was easy to tell if an Ethiopian-Israeli teen entering high school had been in a Limudiah program, because, she said, those who had been in Limudiah, "...came equipped with tools for high school" while others did not.

Today I understand that more than ever.

Now statistics show Ethiopian boys and girls entering high school in Israel are more likely to fail than other youngsters.

This means NACOEJ must open more Limudiah programs and stretch them past the critical 1st and 2nd grades we now often teach, into 3rd and 4th grade, also vital.



In 4th grade, Israeli children take tests that decide if they will be admitted to "good" high schools on a college track, or "low-scale" high schools with college entry very difficult.

And we must also go on to 5th and 6th grades as serious prep for high school, because

even the brightest youngsters sometimes find high school overwhelming.

Let me add, children of Ethiopian descent are not the only ones who need extra help in grade school to get into "good" high schools.

I was startled to learn it is commonplace for well-established families in Israel to hire private tutors for their children in grade school!

A CRISIS IN ISRAEL CONTINUES ON PAGE 2

A CRISIS IN ETHIOPIA



I don't know this man's name, but when I saw this photo of his shining face, the words of Psalm 126 came to mind, and I felt I knew his story.

This beautiful Psalm speaks of a Jewish farmer, who in a time of fear and sorrow, weeps as he plants his seeds. But when things get better and the harvest begins, "he gathers in his crops with cries of joy".

This Jewish man in Ethiopia couldn't have planted seeds recently because he and his family left their farm when they were told that, to apply to make aliyah, they must go to Addis Ababa or Gondar City.

But he surely may have wept as many years went by, and a few planes went to Israel, but he and his family were never on them.

They were always left behind, with fading hope, no farm, scarce work, and now a crisis of plague, war, poverty, and hunger.

It's the story of thousands of Jews still in Ethiopia today, and it is full of tears.

A CRISIS IN ETHIOPIA CONTINUES ON PAGE 2



A CRISIS IN ISRAEL CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

If that's what it takes to get into a "good" high school, Ethiopian children have no chance. Ethiopian families can't afford tutors.

So—it's up to NACOEJ to help.

We've been doing that since I came to Israel on the last flight of Operation Solomon in 1991 and was asked by a government representative if NACOEJ would "stay and help with the absorption of Ethiopian Jews?"



When I said "Yes, of course," he asked "What area would you like to work in?" and I said, "Education!"

I knew education was the key to every child's future and for Ethiopian Jews from a poor country with little schooling, it was the key to the whole community's future in Israel.

But I'm sorry to say, despite the great results we've had in our excellent Limudiah programs (the best equivalent of private tutors), we haven't had the funds to help more than some hundreds of children at a time.

Now, we must quickly help at least 1,000—more if possible. But **is** it possible?

We're adding Limudiah classes in Jerusalem and Beit Shemesh to our current list of Lod, Rishon LeTzion, Kiryat Ekron and Bat Yam.

To add more grades to each school will be costly. To add more towns, more schools in those towns, more grades in the schools, more teachers and children, which we must do quickly, will be very costly.

This is not a crisis of life or death like war, poverty, and hunger in Ethiopia. But it's a crisis we must meet. It determines the future of a generation of Ethiopian Jews in Israel.

With your help, we will do our best.



A CRISIS IN ETHIOPIA CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

But today this man is radiant, thanks to you, dear friends of NACOEJ, because of the 250,000 pounds of tef grain we distributed recently in Addis Ababa and Gondar.

He could hoist onto his shoulder a harvest of grain to feed his family for at least a month, rejoicing as he brings home the sheaves.

I hope all of you in NACOEJ who helped make it possible to send this tef grain to our hungry Ethiopian-Jewish families, even in our own difficult time, will rejoice together with them now.

Bless you for making it possible.



A THANK YOU LETTER FROM ETHIOPIA

In March, NACOEJ provided enough grain to feed the 9,840 Ethiopian Jews in Gondar and the 2,587 Jews in Addis Ababa.

The leaders of the Gondar community sent a beautiful letter expressing their gratitude for the food that will stave off hunger and malnutrition for a while.

Together with our ongoing feeding program for Jewish children under age 5, and pregnant and nursing women, NACOEJ food aid has been saving lives.

New distributions are needed as Jews in Ethiopia still struggle to combat hunger during this terrible time of sky-rocketing food prices and Covid.

We have yet to learn what the new Coalition government in Israel will do about reopening Aliyah. In the meantime, the Jews are still relying on all of us at NACOEJ for their survival.

Please read their letter to us on the next page.

We must be there for them.





SECURING THE FUTURE WITH AWE, LOVE, AND GRATITUDE

WITH AWE

Shlomo Hillel, born in Iraq 97 years ago, knew as a child of a local massacre of Assyrian Christians by Iraqi soldiers and heard his father say, "I wonder what they will do to Jews next".

When Nazis appeared in Iraq, the family fled to Palestine, then under British rule. Shlomo became an ardent Israeli, but he...

...was always conscious of the danger to the 120,000 Jews still in Iraq.

So he became a secret agent of Israeli Intelligence, encouraging the Iraqi Jews to leave to Israel. Then, in disguise, he smuggled them out of Iraq, getting them safely to Israel.

When there were only a few left of 120,000 Jews in Iraq, he settled down, married, became a politician, Speaker of the Knesset, and a member of Israel's Cabinet and Minister of the Interior. Holding this powerful post,

he bravely opened the doors of Israel to Ethiopian Jews!

Later, his son married an Ethiopian young woman he met in college. They learned that it was his father's open door as Minister that brought her to Israel.

In his retirement, Shlomo headed NACOEJ's first Israeli Board in Jerusalem.

Few Israelis knew Shlomo Hillel's story until he was awarded the Israel

Prize for his service. Modestly, he said: "I was lucky to be in the right place at the right time."

But at his death in February 2021, Israel President Reuven Rivlin said: "Shlomo Hillel came from a great generation...that fought with their hands for Israel's independence and its existence as a safe haven for the Jewish people. He worked to bring immigrants to Israel... both openly and in secret, and many owe him their immigration and ensuing lives in this country."

These words ring true as we honor the awesome memory of Shlomo Hillel.

May it be for all of us and all Ethiopian Jews, a blessing.

WITH LOVE

Barbara Reader, long-time member of the NACOEJ Advisory Board, and close friend to Barbara Ribakove, was a trail-blazer, one of the first women to graduate from Yale, a Manhattan Trusts and Estates Attorney, and founder of the global StarTrekReviewed.

She was a protector of endangered turtles, an expert on local politics, relied on by many friends. When years ago, she learned she had metastasized cancer and had only a few months to live, she blazed another trail through every experimental study and on-going trial around, and lived for years, keeping up a good active life.

One story we always cherish came about when Barbara, as a NACOEJ Advisory Board member, learned we were short of funds for an important program. She told Barbara Ribakove: "I've got NACOEJ in my will. Could you use some money better now?" And, getting a startled "Yes!", she wrote out a check that helped us through a rough spot. It was another trail blazed.

Barbara died last March, mourned by her



beloved sister Karyn, Karyn's husband Dennis, nephew Eric, great-nephew Martin, Trent Massey, her companion of many years, and her friends at NACOEJ.

May her memory be for a blessing.

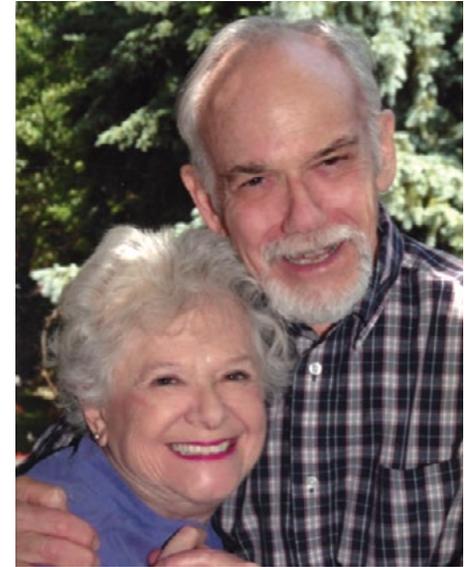
WITH GRATITUDE

Over the last difficult year, NACOEJ programs in Israel and Ethiopia have survived thanks to the generosity of our wonderful donors, including some who left legacies, big or small, to add to our resources.

Our second distribution of tef grain to over 12,000 Jews in Gondar and Addis Ababa, cost about \$150,000. Some of that came from the special generosity of people who were committed to helping NACOEJ's work, during and after their lifetimes.

If you feel that way, please add us to your will or estate or you can call Danielle Ben-Jehuda, Director of Development and Donor Relations, at 212-233-5200, ext. 227.

She will be glad to help you.



Roslyn and Sam Grodzin, who left a legacy to NACOEJ

On behalf of Ethiopian Jews, we are deeply grateful to all those who are helping to secure their future.

A LETTER FROM OUR COLLEGE STUDENT

Editor's Note: During the recent 11-day siege in Israel we wanted to update you on how our college students were being impacted. Then we received this letter from a sponsored AAS college student that expresses so well what it was like to be there on the ground. She's in her first year of working toward a master's degree now.

Dear Mrs. Drench,

In the last month we have faced a new security threat.

I don't remember a time in life when we fled to shelters in the center of the country, but it did happen.

Unfortunately, the terrorist organizations that control the Gaza Strip managed to launch rockets all over the country and shut down life just after corona.*

As a nurse in the pediatric ward, it was very threatening and stressful.

At each alarm we had to lead the children to a close protected space...

...however we managed to create peace and even a kind of educational activity for the hospitalized children—education about love of country and our uniqueness as a united people.

During this period, I continued to study the spring courses on purpose.

A once-in-a-lifetime experience—running to a protected space during a lesson.

The university will try to consider what is possible for the exams, which we will also pass.

With all the dramas in Israel, I am glad I live here, together with my family and to be educated here.

With the goal that one day we will reach peace with the peoples around us and we will be able to unite forces for a brighter future.

Wishing you good health, peace and quiet...

Banchigiza Avig

**In previous wars, Israel was bombarded either in the south or the north.*



“It was wonderful to be part of a miracle...”

THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF OPERATION SOLOMON

As told by Barbara Ribakove, NACOEJ Executive Director

May 24 & 25 were the 30th Anniversary of Operation Solomon.

Over 14,000 Jews were airlifted out of Ethiopia to Israel in a miracle lasting only 36 hours in 1991.

Civil War was raging in Ethiopia at the time. Rebel troops were near the capitol, Addis Ababa. The Ethiopian President fled. Tanks were in the streets. Thousands of Jews in Addis were trapped.

A rescue mission was needed fast. It had to be on Shabbat, because El Al planes, which did not fly on the Sabbath, were available then. The Israeli Chief Rabbis gave permission to fly and violate Shabbat to save Jewish lives.

At an Israeli airfield El Al airplanes had all their seats pulled out to make room for more passengers; Hercules cargo planes stood ready, empty because they usually carried trucks or tanks. Now they would carry thousands of Jews.

But in Addis, the government caretaker had to be told of the rescue. He said he would only approve it if the President of the United States asked him.

In hours, the request came from then President George H.W. Bush. In a little known act of compassion, President Bush helped to save Jewish lives.

In Addis Ababa, teams of Jews spread out to tell people to come to the Israeli Embassy first thing

in the morning. They said:

“Bring nothing but your children, your ID and your medical reports! You're going home!”

In Israel, messages were sent to nearby Arab lands, making certain they knew Israeli planes would be coming and going in a peaceful rescue mission.

At Israel's request, I and two other NACOEJ staff members, Andy Goldman and Solomon Ezra, flew to Addis to join volunteers who had arrived from Israel.

As Jews arrived on the grounds of the Israeli Embassy, we checked IDs, counted family members, and (sorrowfully) took away packages some of the frightened Jews had brought—for security, but also to save space needed for another small child on the plane.

As the day wore on, clouds appeared. May starts Ethiopia's rainy season. There were storms the day before. The Israeli Embassy was small. Could it hold thousands of people in a storm? No.

Thankfully, the clouds blew away.

Evening came. A group of stalwart Israeli young men who arrived on the first planes, strung lights and walked the

walls of the Israeli compound. We felt sure if trouble started, they would protect us.

At one point, local police showed up, but a gift of money sent them away. Some non-Jews came over the walls, hoping to get out of the country. Andy got rid of them.

Bus drivers who had been hired the day before “to take the Jews on a sightseeing trip” realized what was really going on and demanded—and got—more money.

Solomon, an Israeli Ethiopian, was called to participate in the final examination of Jews inside the Embassy.

Night brought a quiet moment. A young American-Israeli man said,

“Now it's Shabbat. Let's celebrate it.”

He pulled a challah and wine from his backpack—enough to give a little to all of us. A Shabbat none of us will ever forget.

All of the flights returned safely to Israel.

And the babies born on the flights, with doctors aboard each plane, were safely born.



It took more than one organization to save the life of:

A LITTLE JEWISH BOY WITH A HOLE IN HIS HEART

It started with a request from Neal Brodsky, a NACOEJ supporter, to help raise funds for 6-year-old Biniyam (Bini) Tesfahun Mare, a little Jewish boy in Ethiopia, who needed to go abroad for surgery.



*Bini getting tested.
Photo: Save a Child's Heart*

Bini had a hole in his heart. Would NACOEJ help raise the funds? The answer was yes.

Bini had been in our feeding program for critically malnourished children, until he "aged out" at 5. His

1-year-old sister is in the program now.

We called Dr. Morris Hartstein in Israel, a wonderful doctor with whom we work in Ethiopia. He said it was urgent to bring Bini to Israel, where he would be treated, at no charge, at SACH (Save a Child's Heart), a pediatric hospital that treats children from all over who need heart surgery.

But how to get Bini there when Israel's airport was shut during Covid? The only hope was a special flight of Ethiopian Jews making Aliyah. If Bini could get on it, he could be saved. But his family was not on the list for the flight.

What was needed was not money, but a miracle. Dr. Hartstein worked on it. So did Pnina Tamano-Shata, Israel's Ethiopian-born Minister of Aliyah. Calls were made and passage was arranged for Bini and his mother, Shashitu. Meketa, a British group in Addis, found a place where Bini and his parents could wait in Addis for the flight.

But when the plane arrived at the Addis Ababa airport, Shashitu tested positive for Covid. So, the scared little boy climbed into

the plane alone. Shira, an Ethiopian-Israeli Jewish Agency guide for passengers, took Bini under her wing for the trip.

But in Israel he was alone again even as he met the warm-hearted nurses and doctors in SACH. They administered all the tests needed for his surgery.

There's a great playroom for waiting and recuperating children at SACH, but Bini would not leave his room. Ibrahim, a child from Zanzibar, heard about Bini, and took matters into his own little hands.



*Ibrahim and Bini.
Photo: Save a Child's Heart*

He walked into Bini's room, held out his hand, and though they didn't speak the same language, Bini went to the playroom with him.

Later, when a nurse told Bini his mother was well and on the way to Israel, he couldn't believe it until she arrived, the day before the operation, which was a great success. Bini's life was saved.

Was this the happy ending to Bini's story in which many organizations and people in three countries took part?

Not quite. Minister Tamano-Shata tried her best to get permission for Bini and his mother to remain in Israel, where they have family. But she was refused.

As I write, they are back in Ethiopia, where wars, plagues, and hunger still rage. NACOEJ will look after them.

FUTURE LEADERS IN EDUCATION

Our Israel office recently said that although some Ethiopian Israelis have become lawyers, judges, doctors, teachers, artists, etc., there are very few in high-level administration posts, where policy is made.

That's a big gap that must be filled, not just for Ethiopians' contributions to policy-making, but also as public figures to be role models for a generation of Ethiopian-Israeli children who never dream of such possible futures.

As an example, years ago, a distinguished Ethiopian man who actually held a post in the Ministry of Education, visited a girls' school in Lod, dressed in business attire.

One of the Ethiopian girls turned to her teacher in disbelief and whispered, "Is he Ethiopian?"

To help fill this important gap, and open our childrens' eyes to their own possibilities, our Israel office is now pioneering a start-up program. It will prepare 18 outstanding Ethiopian men and women who hold master's degrees and have at least three years of teaching experience, to prepare for, qualify, and achieve administrative positions in the Ministry of Education.

The program, which began in virtual classes, is now working in person. The students in the program are now making visits to local and boarding schools (see photo at Yemin Orde above) and already formulating new educational methodologies for at-risk students!

We are proud to say that NACOEJ's educational efforts in Israel go from first grade in elementary school, through high school, college, and post-grad work!

We look forward to our students' successes!



Future Ethiopian Leaders in Education

CONGRATULATIONS

Eden Amare Yitbarek

Eden, of Ethiopian origin, went to college in Israel at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, where she made the Dean's list and won scholarships.

She also graduated from the prestigious Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy.

Along the way she acted as an interpreter for Ethiopian refugees at the Canadian Embassy. She also interned at the Washington D.C. Holocaust Museum.

Now she has become a Rhodes Scholar at the famous Oxford University in England. She says:

"I know I'm the first IDC (Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya) student to be awarded the Rhodes Scholarship, but I want to make sure I'm not the last. I hope to inspire others... never to give up and to always reach for their dreams even if they seem to be impossible and unattainable."

Bravo Eden!



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